# THE EPISTLE TO YEMEN

Not long after his arrival in Egypt in 1167 C.E., Maimonides was appointed physician to the ruler of the country and his entourage. Maimonides was sought out by the Jewish community not only for medical treatment, but also for guidance and help in its private and communal affairs. Such was his reputation that a request for advice soon came to him from Jacob ben Nathanel al-Fayyumi on behalf of the Jews of Yemen. There too a fanatical Muslim movement was threatening the existence of the Jewish community. The movement had been started in 1150 by the Shi'ite Ali ibn Mahdi and was now attempting to force the conversion of all non-Moslems under his son 'Abd al-Nabi' ibn Mahdi.

Jacob raised several issues in his request for advice. What was the significance of the community's suffering? How should they respond to a convert who had become a missionary for Islam and claimed that the Torah itself confirmed the prophethood of Muhammad? What should they make of the claim of another individual to be the Messiah, come to rescue them from their persecutors? Could the date of the Messiah's coming be predicted by astrology?

Maimonides gave his ruling on all these questions in his *Epistle to Yemen* of 1172, so phrasing his answers that the community might be encouraged to avoid succumbing either to the oppressor or to messianic delusions.

# I

To the honored, great, and holy master and teacher, Jacob,[1] wise and genial, dear and revered sage, son of the honored, great, and holy master and teacher, Nathanel Fayyumi, distinguished prince of Yemen, president of its congregations, leader of its communities, may the spirit of God rest upon him, and to all his associates and to all the scholars of the communities of Yemen, may the Lord keep and protect them. From a loving friend who never saw him but knows him only by reputation, Moses ben Maimon ben Joseph ben Isaac ben Obadiah[2] of blessed memory.

Just as plants bear testimony to the existence of roots, and waters are evidence of the excellence of the springs, so has the firm shoot developed from the roots of truth and righteousness, and a huge river has gushed forth from the spring of mercy in the land of Yemen, to water therewith all gardens and to make flowers blossom.[3] It flows gently on to satisfy the needs of the weary and thirsty in the arid places; wayfarers and folks from the isles of the sea satisfy their needs with it. Consequently, it has been proclaimed from Spain to Babylonia, from one end of heaven to the other: *Ho, all who are thirsty, come for water* [Isa. 55:1].[4] Men of business and traffic unanimously declare to all inquirers that they have found in the land of Yemen a beautiful and delightful plantation and a rich pasture with faithful shepherds wherein every lean one shall wax fat. They strengthen the indigent with bread and greet the opulent with hospitality and generosity; even the Sabean caravans look forward to their benevolence.[5] Their hands are stretched out to every passerby, and their homes are wide open to every traveler. With them all find tranquillity; sorrow and sighing flee. They continually study the Law of Moses, walk in the way of R. Ashi,[6] pursue justice, repair the breach, uphold the principles of Torah, bring back the stray people of God with encouraging words, observe the religious ceremonies punctiliously in their communities. *There is no breaching and no sortie, and no wailing in our streets* [Ps. 144:14].

Blessed be the Lord, that He has suffered Jews to remain who observe the Torah and obey its injunctions in the most distant peninsulas, as we were graciously assured through Isaiah, His servant, for it is to you people of Yemen he was alluding when he prophesied: *From the end of the earth we hear singing* [Isa. 24:16].[7]

When we departed from the West *to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, to frequent His temple* [Ps. 27:4],[8] I learned that he[9] passed away. May God bestow His justice and goodness upon him. May he enter unto peace and rest upon his bed. May He send him angels of mercy. May he rest and rise up for his reward at the end of days. This, my dearly beloved friend, is proof that God was pleased with his deeds, and that He will compensate him doubly and grant him peace, that you are his son, and have risen in his place to promote religion and observance, to further justice and righteousness, to obey His precepts and laws, and to abide by His covenant. May the Lord your God be with you as He was with your fathers. May He not forsake nor abandon you. May He give you deep understanding to judge His people. *May His words never depart from your mouth, nor the mouth of your children* [Isa. 59:21], as He declared. May you follow your father as leader of His people, and may God grant that your fame be greater than his.

When your letter, my dearly beloved friend, arrived in Egypt, all were pleased to hear of it and delighted to look at it. It bore witness that you are one of the ministers of the Lord who dwell in His domain and are pitched at His standard, that you pursue the study of the Torah, love its laws, and watch at its gates. May the Lord divulge its secrets unto you, and stock you abundantly with the knowledge of its treasures, make its crown your chief crown, place its necklace upon your neck. May its words be a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path, and may you become celebrated through them. *And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the Lord's name is proclaimed over you, and they shall stand in fear of you* [Deut. 28:10].[10]

As for the information in your letter, my dear friend, that you heard some of our coreligionists in the Diaspora—may the Lord keep and protect them—praise and extol me very highly and compare me with the illustrious *geonim*, they have spoken thus about me out of mere tenderness for me, and written about me out of pure goodness.[11] However, listen to a word fitly spoken by me, and give no heed to the

sayings of others. I am one of the humblest scholars of Spain whose prestige is low in exile. I am always dedicated to my duties, but have not attained to the learning of my forebears, for evil days and hard times have overtaken us and we have not lived in tranquillity; we have labored without finding rest. How can the Law become lucid to a fugitive from city to city, from country to country? I have everywhere pursued the reapers and gathered ears of grain, both the solid and the full, as well as the shriveled and the thin. Only recently have I found a home.[12] Were it not for the help of God, as we are told by our ancestors, I would not have gathered the little I have, from which I continually draw.[13]

Now, the princely priest R. Shelomo, my friend and disciple,[14] who, as you write, indulges in hyperboles in praise of me and speaks extravagantly in appreciation of me, exaggerates unreasonably because he wants to, and waxes enthusiastic because he loves and cherishes me. May the Lord guard him, so that he is like a blooming vineyard, and may he return to us hale and hearty.

The other matters in your letter that you wish me to speak of, I deem it best to write in the Arabic tongue and idiom,[15] so that all men, women, and children can read it with ease,[16] for it is right that your membership be enabled to understand the contents of the reply.

You write of the affair of the rebel leader in Yemen[17] who decreed forced apostasy of the Jews, and compelled all the Jewish inhabitants in all the places he had subdued to desert their religion, just as the Berbers had obliged them to do in the Maghreb.[18] This report has broken our backs and astounded and dumbfounded the whole of our community, and rightly so. For these are evil tidings, and *both ears of everyone who hears about it will tingle* [1 Sam. 3:11 and 2 Kings 21:12]. Indeed, our hearts are weakened, our minds are confused, and our strength wanes because of the dire misfortunes that have come upon us in the form of the religious persecution in the two ends of the world, the East and West, *so they were in the midst of Israel, some on this side and some on the other side* [Josh. 8:22].[19] It is of the like of this dreadful occasion the prophet prayed and interceded in our behalf: *I said, "Oh, Lord God, refrain! How will Jacob survive? He is so small"* [Amos 7:5].[20] Indeed, this is a subject that no religious person dare

take lightly,[21] nor anyone put aside who believes faithfully in Moses. There is no doubt that these are the messianic travails[22] concerning which the sages invoked God that they be spared seeing and experiencing them. The prophets trembled when they envisioned them, as Isaiah reacted: *My heart pants, fearfulness affrights me; the twilight I longed for has been turned into trembling* [Isa. 21:4].[23] And the divine exclamation in the Torah expresses sympathy with those who will experience them, by saying: *Alas, who shall live when God does this!* [Num. 24:23].[24]

When you write that the hearts of some people have turned, uncertainty befalls them, and their beliefs are weakened, while others have not lost faith and not become disquieted, we have a divine premonition of it through Daniel. For he predicted that the long stay of Israel in exile and the continuous persecution would cause many to drift away from our faith, to have misgivings, or go astray, because they were to witness our feebleness and note the triumph of our adversaries and their dominion over us, while still others would neither oscillate in their belief, nor be shaken in their convictions. He states: *Many shall purify themselves, and make themselves white, and be refined; but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand* [Dan. 12:10].[25] Further, he explains that even men of understanding and intelligence, who would have brooked milder misfortunes and remained firm in their belief in God and in His servant Moses, will yield to distrust and will err when they are visited by sterner and harsher afflictions. Only a few will remain pure in faith, for he adds: *And some of them that are wise shall stumble* [Dan. 11:35].[26]

And now, brethren, it is essential that all of you give attention and consideration to what I am going to point out to you.[27] Teach it to your women and children, so that their faith, to the extent that it has become enfeebled and impaired, may be strengthened, and that enduring certainty may be reestablished in their hearts. It is—may the Lord deliver you and me—that ours is the true and divine religion, revealed to us through Moses, chief of the former as well as of the later prophets.[28] By means of it God has distinguished us from the rest of mankind, as He declares: *Yet it was to your fathers that the Lord was drawn in His love for them, so that He chose you, their lineal descendants, from among all the peoples* [Deut. 10:15]. This choice was not made thanks

to our merits, but was rather an act of grace, on account of our ancestors who were cognizant of God and obedient to Him, as He states: *It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the Lord set His heart on you and chose you—indeed, you are the smallest of peoples* [Deut. 7:7].[29]

Since God has singled us out by His laws and precepts, and our preeminence over the others was manifested in His rules and statutes, as Scripture says in narrating God's mercies to us: *What great nation has laws and rules as perfect as all this Teaching that I set before you this day?* [Deut. 4:8];[30] all the nations, instigated by envy and impiety, rose up against us in anger, and all the kings of the earth, motivated by injustice and enmity, applied themselves to persecute us. They wanted to thwart God, but He will not be thwarted. Ever since the time of revelation[31] every despot or rebel ruler, be he violent or ignoble, has made it his first aim and his final purpose to destroy our Law, and to vitiate our religion by means of the sword, by violence, or by brute force. Such were Amalek, Sisera, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Titus, Hadrian,[32] and others like them.

The second class consists of the most intelligent and educated among the nations, like the Syrians, Persians, and Greeks.[33] They also endeavor to demolish our Law and to abrogate it by means of arguments that they invent and controversies that they institute. They seek to render the Law ineffectual and to wipe out every trace of it with their compositions, just as the despots try to do with their swords. But neither the one nor the other shall succeed. For a long time ago the assurance was given us through Isaiah that every tyrant who seeks to triumph over our Law and annihilate it by weapons of war will be demolished by the Lord so that they will have no effect. This is a metaphorical way of saying that his efforts will be of no avail. Likewise every disputant who will attempt to demonstrate the falsity of our Law, the Lord will shatter his arguments and prove them absurd, untenable, and ineffective. This is the divine promise: *No weapon formed against you shall succeed, and every tongue that contends with you at law you shall defeat* [Isa. 54:17].[34] Although both of these persuade themselves that this is a structure that can be demolished and lay plans to undermine its firmly established foundations, they only increase their pain and toil. The structure remains as firm as ever, while the Constant[35]

mocks and derides them because they endeavor with their feeble intelligence to achieve something no human being can undertake. The prophet,[36] describing their efforts and God's scorn of them, says: *Let us break the cords of their yoke, shake off their ropes from us! He who is enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord mocks at them* [Ps. 2:3–4].[37] We have been incessantly distressed and harassed by these two parties all through the epoch of our political independence, and in part during the period of our dispersion.[38]

After that a new class arose that combined the two methods, namely, conquest, controversy, and dispute[39] into one, because it believed that this procedure would be more effective in wiping out every trace of the community. It therefore resolved to lay claim to prophecy and to found a new Law, contrary to our divine religion, and to contend that it also came from God, like the true claim. Thus doubts will be generated and confusion will be created, since one is opposed to the other and both supposedly emanated from one god, and it will lead to the destruction of both religions. This is a remarkable plan contrived by a person who is envious and malicious, who will strive to kill his enemy and remain alive, and if he cannot achieve this, he will devise a scheme whereby they both will be slain.[40]

The first to institute this plan was Jesus the Nazarene,[41] may his bones be ground to dust. He was Jewish because his mother was a Jewess although his father was a gentile, and our principle is that a child born of a Jewess and a gentile or a slave, is legitimate.[42] Only figuratively do we call him an illegitimate child.[43] He impelled people to believe that he was sent by God to clarify perplexities in the Torah, and that he was the Messiah predicted by each and every prophet. His purpose was to interpret the Torah in a fashion that would lead to its total annulment, to the abolition of its commandments, and to the violation of all its prohibitions. The sages of blessed memory, aware of his objective before his reputation spread among our people, meted out a fitting punishment.[44] Daniel had already alluded to him when he presaged the downfall of a wicked and heretical Jew who would endeavor to destroy the Law, claim prophecy for himself, make pretense to miracles, and allege that he was the Messiah, as is written: *The children of the impudent among your people shall make bold to claim prophecy, but they shall fall* [Dan. 11:14].[45]

Quite some time later, a religion, which is traced to him by the descendants of Esau, gained popularity.[46] Although this was the aim he hoped to realize, he had no impact on Israel, as neither groups nor individuals became unsettled in their beliefs. His inconsistencies were transparent to everyone, as was also his failure and disappointment when he fell into our hands with the well-known end.[47] After him the Madman[48] arose, who emulated the precursor who had paved the way for him. But he added the further objective of procuring rule and obedience,[49] and he invented his notorious religion.

All of these men wish to liken themselves to the divine religion.[50] But only a simpleton who lacks knowledge of both establishments will liken the divine institutions to human contrivances. The difference between our religion and the other denominations that liken themselves to us is like the difference between the living, rational individual and the statue skillfully molded out of marble, wood, silver, or gold that looks like a man.[51] A person ignorant of divine wisdom or of God's work, when he sees the statue that superficially resembles a man in its contours, form, features, and color, believes that its structure is like the constitution of a man, because he lacks the knowledge of the inner organization of both. But the informed person who knows the interior of both, knows that the internal composition of the statue betrays no skillful workmanship at all, whereas the inward parts of man are truly marvelously made, a testimony to the wisdom of the Creator. The prolongation of the nerves in the muscles and their ramifications, the branching out of the sinews and their intersections, and the network of their ligaments and their manner of growth, the articulations of the bones and the joints, the pulsating and nonpulsating blood vessels and their ramifications, the setting of the limbs into one another, the uncovered and covered parts, every one of them is in proportion, in form, and in its proper place.

Likewise a person ignorant of the secrets of the revealed books and the inner significance of our Law will be led to believe that our religion has something in common with the established confession if he makes a comparison between the two. For he will find that in the Torah there are prohibitions and commandments, and there are prohibitions and commandments in the others; the Torah contains positive and negative precepts, rewards, and punishments, and the others contain negative

and positive commandments, rewards, and punishments. Yet if he could only fathom the inner meanings, he would realize that the essence of the Torah lies in the deeper meaning of its positive and negative precepts, every one of which will aid man in his striving after perfection and remove every impediment to the attainment of excellence. They will enable the masses and the elite to acquire moral and intellectual qualities, each according to his ability. Thus, the godly community becomes preeminent, reaching a twofold perfection.[52] By the first I mean man's leading his life in this world under the most agreeable and congenial conditions. The second will constitute the gain of the intelligibles,[53] each in accordance with his native powers. The pretentious religions contain matters that have no inner meaning, only imitations, simulations, and copies by which the inventors aimed to glorify themselves and indulge in the fancy that they are similar to so-and-so. However, their shameful action is an open secret to the learned. They became an object of derision and ridicule,[54] just as one laughs and scoffs at a monkey when it tries to imitate the actions of human beings.

This was predicted by the divinely inspired prophet Daniel, according to whom, in some future time, it would happen.[55] Sometime later a person will appear with a religion similar to the true one, with a book and oral communications, who will arrogantly pretend that God has vouchsafed him a revelation, and that he held converse with Him, and other extravagant claims. In his description of the rise of the Arab kingdom after the Byzantine Empire, he compared the appearance of the Madman and his victories over the Byzantines, Persians, and Greeks with a horn that grew and became long and strong. This is clearly indicated in a verse that can be understood by the masses as well as by the select few. Since this interpretation is borne out by the facts of history, no other meaning can be given to the following verse: *I considered the horns, and, behold, another little horn came among them before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots; and, behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a human, and a mouth speaking big things* [Dan. 7:8]. Now consider how remarkably apt the symbolism is. He says that he saw a small horn that was going up. When it became longer, even marvelously longer, it cast three horns down before it, and behold, the horn had two eyes similar to the eyes

of a human, and a mouth speaking big things. This obviously alludes to the person who will found a new religion similar to the divine religion and make claim to a revelation and to prophecy. He will produce much talk and will endeavor to alter this Torah and abolish it, as He states: *And he shall seek to change the seasons and the law* [Dan. 7:25].

But God informed him that He would destroy this person, notwithstanding his greatness and his long endurance, together with the remaining adherents of his predecessors. For the three parties that warred against us will ultimately perish: the one that sought to overpower us with the sword, the second that claimed it had arguments against us, and the third that claims to have a religion similar to ours. Though they shall appear to be triumphant for a while, and be in the ascendancy for a longer or shorter period of time, they shall neither last nor endure. We have a continuous divine assurance that whenever a decree of apostasy is passed against us and wrath breaks out, God will ultimately terminate it. When King David, inspired by the Holy Spirit and speaking in the name of the community, reflected on how many peoples ruled over it in the past, and how many trials and tribulations they had undergone from the beginning of their history, and nevertheless were not exterminated, he exclaimed: *Since my youth they have often assailed me, but they have never overcome me* [Ps. 129:2].

My brethren, you know that in the time of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar the Jews were compelled to worship idols, and none was spared save Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.[56] Ultimately God destroyed him, and put an end to his laws, and the religion of truth came back into its own. Similarly, during the Second Commonwealth, when the wicked Greek rulers gained control, they instituted severe persecution against Israel in order to abolish the Torah. The Jews were compelled to profane the Sabbath and forbidden to practice circumcision. Every Jew was forced to write on his garment, "I do not have a portion in the Lord God of Israel," and also to engrave these words on the horns of his ox and then to plow with it.[57] Finally, God simultaneously brought their empire and their laws to an end, after a lapse of fifty-two years.[58] The sages of blessed memory frequently allude to persecutions in the following manner: "Once the wicked government passed such and such a decree of persecution,"[59] or "they decreed thus and so."[60] After a while God would make the decree null and void by

destroying the power that issued it. It was this observation that led the rabbis of blessed memory to affirm that persecutions are of short duration.[61]

Indeed God assured our father Jacob that although his children would be humbled and overcome by the nations, they and not the nations would survive and would endure. He declares: *Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth* [Gen. 28:14],[62] that is to say, although they will be abased like the dust that is trodden under foot, they will ultimately emerge triumphant and victorious. And, as the simile implies, just as the dust settles finally upon him who tramples upon it and remains after him, so will Israel outlive its oppressors.[63] The prophet Isaiah predicted that during its exile various peoples will succeed in their endeavor to vanquish Israel and lord over them, but that ultimately God will come to Israel's assistance and put a stop to their woes and afflictions. He says: *A harsh prophecy has been announced to me: "The betrayer is betraying, the ravager ravaging. Advance Elam! Lay siege, Media! I have put an end to all her sighing"* [Isa. 21:2].[64] The Lord has given us assurance through His prophets that we are indestructible and imperishable, and we will always continue to be a preeminent community. As it is impossible for God to cease to exist, so is our destruction and disappearance from the world unthinkable. He declares: *For I am the Lord—I have not changed; and you are the children of Jacob—you have not ceased to be* [Mal. 3:6]. Similarly, He has avowed and assured us that it is unimaginable that He will reject us entirely even if we disobey Him and disregard His behests, as He avers: *If the heavens above could be measured, and the foundations of the earth below could be fathomed, only then would I reject all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done—declares the Lord* [Jer. 31:37].[65] In fact, this very promise was previously given through Moses our Teacher in the Torah. It reads: *Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God* [Lev. 26:44].[66]

Put your trust in these true texts of Scripture, brethren, and be not dismayed by the succession of persecutions or the enemy's ascendancy over us, or the weakness of our people. These trials are designed to test and purify us, so that only the saints and the pious men of the

pure and undefiled lineage of Jacob will adhere to our religion and remain within the fold, as has been stated: *Anyone who invokes the name of Lord shall be among the survivors* [Joel 3:5].[67] This statement makes it clear that they are not numerous, and that they are the descendants of those who were present at Mount Sinai,[68] witnessed the divine revelation, entered into the covenant of God, and took upon themselves to do and obey, declaring, *we will do, and obey* [Exod. 24:7].[69] They obligated themselves and their descendants, by saying: *for us and our children* [for]*ever* [Deut. 29:28].[70] God has given assurance—He is an adequate guarantor—and informed them that not only did all the persons who were present at the Sinaitic revelation believe in the prophecy of Moses and in his Law, but that their descendants would likewise do so until the end of time. He declares: *I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after* [Exod. 19:9]. Consequently, let everyone know who spurns the religion that was revealed at that theophany that he is not an offspring of the folk that witnessed it. This is what the sages of Israel of blessed memory said of those who entertain scruples concerning the divine message: They are not the scions of the race that was present at Mount Sinai.[71] May God guard me and you from doubt, and banish from our midst confusion and suspicion that lead to it and ensnare in it.

Now, all my fellow countrymen in the Diaspora, it behooves you to hearten one another, the elders to guide the youth, and the leaders to direct the masses. Gain the assent of your community[72] to the Truth that is immutable and unchangeable, and to the following postulates of the true faith that shall never fail.[73] God is one in a unique sense of the term.[74] And Moses, His prophet and spokesman,[75] is the greatest and most perfect of all the seers. To him was vouchsafed the knowledge of God, what has never been vouchsafed to any prophet before him, nor will it be in the future. The entire Torah from beginning to end[76] was spoken by God to Moses, of whom it is said: *With him I speak mouth to mouth* [Num. 12:8].[77] It will never be abrogated or superseded, neither supplemented nor abridged. Never shall it be supplanted by another divine law containing positive or negative duties. Keep the revelation at Mount Sinai well in mind in accordance with the divine precept to perpetuate the memory and not to forget this

occasion. He enjoined us to teach it to our children so that they grow up knowing it, as He—exalted be the Speaker—says: *But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind so long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children's children: The day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb* [Deut. 4:9–10].[78]

It is imperative, my fellow Jews, that you make this great spectacle of the revelation appeal to the imagination of your children. Proclaim at public gatherings its nobility and its momentousness. For it is the pivot of our religion and the proof that demonstrates its veracity. Evaluate this phenomenon in its true importance, as God pointed out its significance in the verse: *You have but to inquire about bygone ages that came before you, ever since God created man on earth, from one end of heaven to the other: has anything as grand as this ever happened, or has its like ever been known? Has any people heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire?* [Deut. 4:32–33]. Remember, brethren, that this great, incomparable, and unique covenant and faith is attested by the best of evidence. For never before or since has a whole nation heard the speech of God or beheld His splendor. This was done only to confirm us in the faith, so that nothing can change it, and to reach a degree of certainty that will sustain us in these trying times of fierce persecution and absolute tyranny, as He says: *For God has come only in order to test you* [Exod. 20:17].[79] It means that God has revealed Himself thus to give you strength to withstand all future trials. Now, brethren, do not slip or err, be steadfast in your religion and persevere in your faith and its duties.

Long ago Solomon[80] compared our community with a beautiful woman having a perfect figure, marred by no defect, in the verse: *Every part of you is fair, my darling; there is no blemish in you* [Song of Songs 4:7].[81] He further depicted the adherents of other religions and faiths, who strive to entice us and win us over to their convictions as beguiling seducers who lure virtuous women for their lewd purposes. Similarly they seek devices to trap us into embracing their religions, and subscribing to their doctrines. To those who endeavor to decoy her into avowing the superiority of their creed, he in his wisdom answered in

the name of the community: "Why do you take hold of me, can you confer upon me something like the felicity of the two companies?" She challenges them, saying: "If you can furnish me with something like the theophany at Sinai, in which the camp of Israel faced the camp of the divine presence, then I shall espouse your doctrine."[82] This is metaphorically expressed in the verse: *Turn back, turn back, O maid of Shulem! Turn back, turn back, that we may gaze upon you. "Why will you gaze at the Shulammite in the Mahanaim dance?"* [Song of Songs 7:1][83] *Shulammite* signifies the perfect one; the *Mahanaim dance* the joy of the revelation at Mt. Sinai that was shared by the camp[84] of Israel, as He states: *Moses led the people out of the camp toward God* [Exod. 19:17],[85] and the camp of God, as He explained saying: *God's chariots are myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands* [Ps. 68:18].[86]

Note well the wisdom and the deep significance of the verse. The fourfold occurrence of the word *return* is an allusion to the four empires, each of which has endeavored to coerce us to abandon our faith and to join it. Now we are living under the last of them.[87] God has warned us in the Torah that they would draw us to accept their faith, for He says: *There you will serve man-made gods of wood and stone* [Deut. 4:28].[88] However, even then it will not be general throughout the world,[89] and God will never deprive us of His Law, as He assured us: *Since it will never be lost from the mouth of their offspring* [Deut. 31:21].[90] Indeed, Isaiah, the herald of national redemption, has explained that the sign between us and Him, and the token that proves that we are indestructible lies in the perpetuation of God's Torah and His words among us: *And this shall be My covenant with them, said the Lord: My spirit which is upon you, and the words which I have placed in your mouth shall not be absent from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your children, nor from the mouth of your children's children—said the Lord—from now on, for all time* [Isa. 59:21]. Our nation speaks with pride of the persecutions it has suffered, and the sore tribulations it has endured, as he states: *It is for Your sake that we are slain all day long, that we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered* [Ps. 44:23].[91] The rabbis remark in Midrash Ḥazita[92] that the expression *it is for Your sake* alludes to the generations that undergo

persecution. Let these persons exult who suffer dire misfortunes, are deprived of their riches, are forced into exile, and lose their belongings. For the bearing of these hardships is a source of glory and a great achievement in the sight of God. Whoever is visited by these calamities is like a burnt offering upon the altar.[93] It is said to them: *Dedicate yourselves to the Lord this day . . . that He may bestow a blessing upon you today* [Exod. 32:29].[94]

It therefore behooves the victims of this persecution to escape and flee to the desert and wilderness, and not to consider separation from family or loss of wealth.[95] For they are a slight sacrifice and a paltry offering due to God, King of kings, possessor of all things, *this honored and awesome Name, the Lord your God* [Deut. 28:58].[96] God may be trusted to compensate you well in this world and in the world-to-come. Thus we have found that the godly and pious folk who are animated by a desire to get acquainted with the truth and those who are engaged in its pursuit, rush to the divine religion, and wend their way from the most distant parts to the homes of scholars.[97] They seek to gain increased insight into the Law, that they may gain reward from God. How much more is it one's duty to run for the entire Torah! We know that when a man finds it arduous to gain a livelihood in one country, he emigrates to another. It is all the more incumbent upon one who is restricted in the practice of the divine religion to depart for another place. If he finds it impossible to leave that locality for the time being, he must not become careless and indulge in the desecration of the Sabbath and the dietary laws on the assumption that he is exempt from all religious obligations.[98] It is the eternally inescapable duty of everyone belonging to the stock of Jacob to abide by the Law. Nay, he exposes himself to punishment for the violation of each and every positive or negative precept. Let no one conclude that he may freely disregard the less important ceremonies without liability to penalty because he has under duress committed some major sins.[99] For Jeroboam son of Nebat, may his bones be ground to dust,[100] was chastised not only for the sin of worshiping the calves and inciting the Israelites to do the same, but also for his failure to construct a booth on the Feast of Tabernacles.[101] This is one of the fundamentals of our religion. Understand it aright, teach it, and apply the principle widely.

## II

You mention that the apostate[102] has misled people to believe that *bm'd m'd* is the Madman,[103] or that in the same way *He appeared from Mount Paran* [Deut. 33:2][104] alludes to him, or similarly, that *a prophet from among your own people* [Deut. 18:15][105] refers to him, or likewise his promise to Ishmael: *I will make of him a great nation* [Gen. 17:20].[106] These arguments have been rehearsed so often that they have become nauseating. It is not enough to declare that they are altogether feeble; nay, to cite them as proofs is ridiculous and absurd in the extreme. Neither the untutored multitudes, nor the apostates themselves who delude others with them, believe in them or entertain any illusions about them. Their sole purpose in citing these verses is to win favor in the eyes of the gentiles by demonstrating that they believe the statement of the Koran that Muhammad was mentioned in the Torah. But the Muslims themselves do not accept these arguments; they do not admit them nor cite them, because they are manifestly fallacious. Inasmuch as the Muslims could not find a single proof in the entire Bible, nor a reference, or possible allusion to their prophet that they could utilize, they are compelled to accuse us, saying: "You have altered the text of the Torah, and expunged every trace of the name of Muhammad therefrom."[107] They could find nothing stronger than this ignominious argument, the falsity of which is easily demonstrated to one and all by the fact that the Torah had been translated into Syriac, Greek, Persian, and Latin hundreds of years before the appearance of the "prepostle,"[108] and by the fact that it is an unbroken tradition[109] in the East and the West, with the result that no differences in the text exist at all, not even in the vocalization, for they are all correct. Nor do any differences affecting the meaning exist.[110] Only the absence of any allusion to him in the Torah compelled them to rely on these weak proofs.

The phrase *a great nation* implies neither prophecy nor a Law, but merely large numbers and no more,[111] just as He says of the idolaters *nations greater and more numerous than you* [Deut. 11:23].[112] Similarly, the phrase *bm'd m'd* simply signifies *exceedingly*. If the allusion in the phrase were intended to *that one*, it would read *and I shall bless him bm'd m'd*,[113] so that whoever likes to hang on a spider's web might

then declare that it means: "I shall bless him that that one may be his seed." But since *bm'd m'd* follows *I will make him numerous*, it can only denote an extravagant increase in numbers.[114]

When God spoke to Abraham He made it amply clear that all the blessings that He promised and all his children to whom He will reveal the Law and whom He will make the Chosen People—all this is meant only for the seed of Isaac.[115] Ishmael is regarded as an adjunct and appendage in the blessings of Isaac, for He says: *As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed* [Gen. 21:13].[116] He clearly explains in this verse that Isaac holds a primary position and Ishmael a subordinate place.[117] He announces: *For it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you* [Gen. 21:12] and He ignores Ishmael entirely. The meaning is that although the seed of Ishmael will be vast in numbers, it will be neither preeminent nor the object of divine favor, nor distinguished by the attainment of excellence by which one may become famed or celebrated. Nay, your merit will become known by your illustrious offspring, the seed that will issue from Isaac. The literal meaning of *shall be continued* is *shall be called*, as in the verse: *in them may my name be recalled, and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac* [Gen. 48:16];[118] the sense is "you will become famed and celebrated through them." He further stated regarding Isaac that one of the blessings of which He assured Abraham would be that God's Torah and religion would be vouchsafed to his children, as He promised: *I will be their God* [Gen. 17:8].[119] Thus He singled out Isaac to the exclusion of Ishmael in all these blessings. He singled out him and not Ishmael in the religion, as He states: *But My covenant I will maintain with Isaac* [Gen. 17:21],[120] after saying regarding Ishmael: *I hereby bless him* [Gen. 17:20]. He made it clear through Isaac that Jacob was singled out in all this to the exclusion of Esau, for Isaac said to him: *May He grant the blessing of Abraham to you* [Gen. 28:4].[121] In a word, it is clear from the verses in the Torah that the divine covenant made with Abraham to grant the sublime Law to his descendants referred exclusively to those who belonged to the stock of both Isaac and Jacob. Hence the prophet[122] expresses his gratitude to God for the covenant *that He made with Abraham, swore to Isaac, and confirmed in a decree for Jacob, for Israel, as an eternal covenant* [Ps. 105:9–10 and 1 Chron. 16:16–17].

It is also important that you know that the name of the prophet that the Ishmaelites think is written in the Torah, *bm'd m'd*, to which the apostates cling,[123] is not *MHMD* but *AHMD*. So it is explicitly stated: "They find him mentioned in the Torah and the Gospels;"[124] "his name is *AHMD*."[125] The numerical value of *bm'd m'd* is not equal to this name, which is supposed to be written in the Torah.[126]

His argument from the phrase *he appeared from Mount Paran* is not valid. *Appeared* is past tense. Had it employed the future tense "he will appear from Mount Paran," the impostors might have had something to hang onto. However, the use of the past tense indicates that it is an event that has taken place, namely, it describes the revelation at Mount Sinai: It did not descend suddenly like a thunderbolt, but came down gently, manifesting itself gradually first from the top of one mountain, then from another, until it came to rest on Sinai. Hence He says: *The Lord came from Sinai; He shone upon them from Seir; He appeared from Mount Paran* [Deut. 33:2]. Mark well the expression *upon them*, i.e., Israel. Note that with Paran, which is further removed from Sinai, He says *appeared;* of Seir, which is nearer, *He shone;* and of the revelation, of the full splendor of God on Sinai, which was the goal of the theophany (as is related): *The Presence of the Lord abode on Mount Sinai* [Exod. 24:16],[127] He says *came from Sinai*.

Similarly, the idea that the Light descended gradually from mountain to mountain is conveyed in Deborah's description of the grandeur of Israel at the revelation at Sinai, when she exclaimed: *O Lord, when You came forth from Seir, advanced from the country of Edom, . . .* [Judg. 5:4].[128] Basing themselves on this verse, our sages relate that God sent a messenger before the time of Moses to go to the Romans, and another to go to the Arabs with the purpose of presenting them with the Torah,[129] but each of them in turn spurned it. When Moses was sent to us we signified our acceptance in the words: *All that the Lord has spoken we will do and obey* [Exod. 24:7].[130] The aforementioned event happened before the giving of the Torah, consequently the verbs in it come in the past: *He came, He shone, He appeared;* they are not predictions of what will be.

You write in your letter that some people were duped by the apostate's argument that Muhammad is alluded to in the verse: *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet from among your own people,*

*like myself* [Deut. 18:15],[131] while others remained unconvinced because of the phrase *from among your own people*.[132] It is most astonishing that some folks should be duped by this, while others were almost persuaded, were it not for the phrase *from among your own people*. Under these circumstances it is incumbent upon you to concentrate and understand what I am about to say. Remember that it is not right to take a passage out of its context and argue from it. Before making any deduction, it is imperative to take into account the preceding and following contents in order to comprehend the meaning and fathom the writer's aim.[133] If it were permissible for anyone to draw proof from passages out of context, someone would have the right to say that God has forbidden us in the Torah to obey any prophet, and interdicted belief in miracles, for he could cite the passage: *Do not heed the words of that prophet* [Deut. 13:4].[134] He could also maintain that God commands us to worship idols, for He says: *There you will serve man-made gods* [Deut. 4:28].[135] Other illustrations could be multiplied *ad libitum*. But this is absolutely vicious. No text can possibly be cited as evidence before the aim of the author and its context are grasped.

In order to comprehend the verse under discussion unequivocally: *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet from among your own people like myself*, it is necessary to ascertain its context. In the beginning of the paragraph from which this verse is taken, He forbids us to engage in acts of augury, divination, astrology, witchcraft, spells, and the like. The gentiles believe that through these practices they can predict the future course of events and take the necessary precautions to forestall them. The interdiction of these occult proceedings is accompanied by the explication that the gentiles believe they can depend upon them to determine future happenings. But you may not follow this method in order to know what will happen. Nay, you will know it from a prophet that I will send among you, who will truthfully inform you of what is going to be and it will not fail. You will arrive at a foreknowledge of the future from him, without recourse to augury, divination, astrology, and the like. Matters will be facilitated for you by the fact that every prophet whom I will send to foretell what will happen will live in your midst. You will not be compelled to go in

search of him from country to country, nor to travel to distant parts. This is the sense of *in your midst*.

Moreover, He conveys another notion, namely, that in addition to being near you and living in your midst, he will also be one of you, an Israelite. The obvious deduction is that you shall be distinguished above all others by the sole possession of prophecy. The words *like myself* were specifically added to indicate that only the descendants of Jacob are meant. For the phrase *from among your own people* might have been misunderstood and taken to refer also to Esau and Ishmael, since we do find Israel addressing Esau as brother, in the verse: *Thus says your brother Israel* [Num. 20:14].[136] The words *like myself* cannot mean like me in rank and achievement, for He had indeed stated: *Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses* [Deut. 34:10].[137] The general drift of the chapter points to the correctness of our interpretation and will be confirmed by the succession of verses, to wit: *Let no one be found among you who consigns his son or daughter to the fire* [Deut. 18:10]; *one who casts spells* [Deut. 18:11]; *you must be wholehearted* [Deut. 18:13]; *to you, however, the Lord your God has not assigned the like* [Deut. 18:14]; *a prophet from among your own people* [Deut. 18:15].[138] It is obvious that the prophet alluded to here will not be a person who will produce a new Law or found a new religion. He will merely enable us to dispense with diviners and astrologers, and will be available for consultation concerning anything that may befall us, just as the gentiles consult soothsayers and prognosticators. Thus we find Saul inquiring of Samuel regarding a loss that he sustained, as is stated: *For the prophet of today was formerly called a seer* [1 Sam. 9:9].[139]

Our disbelief in the prophecies of Omar and Zeid[140] is not due to the fact that they are non-Jews, as the unlettered folk imagine, and in consequence of it are compelled to establish their stand from the biblical phrase *from among your own people*. For Job, Zophar, Bildad, Eliphaz, and Elihu are all considered prophets by us although they are not Israelites.[141] On the other hand, although Hananiah the son of Azzur was a Jew, he was deemed an accursed and false prophet.[142] But we give credence to a prophet or we disbelieve him because of what he preaches, not because of his descent, as I shall explain. This

prophet Moses our Master, foremost among all the prophets, whose colloquy with God we heard, and in whom we reposed implicit faith when we said to him, *you go closer and hear* [Deut. 5:24],[143] assured us that no other Law remained in heaven that would be subsequently revealed, nor would there be another divine dispensation, as He says: *It is not in the heavens* [Deut. 30:12].[144] For this reason we have been forbidden to make any additions to the Law or to eliminate anything, for He said: *Neither add to it nor take away from it* [Deut. 13:1].[145] We pledged and obligated ourselves to God to abide by His Law, we, our children, and our children's children, until the end of time. This is the content of his statement: *Concealed acts concern the Lord our God; but with overt acts, it is for us and our children ever to apply all the provisions of this Teaching* [Deut. 29:28]. Any prophet, therefore, no matter what his pedigree is, be he priest, Levite, or Amalekite, is perfidious even if he asserts that only one of the precepts of the Torah is void, for he denies our Master Moses who said: *for us and our children ever*. We would declare such a one a false prophet and would execute him if we had jurisdiction over him.[146] We would take no notice of the miracles that he might perform, just as we disregard the wonder-working of one who seeks to lure people to idolatry, as He says: *Even if the sign or portent that he named to you comes true, do not heed the words of that prophet* [Deut. 13:3–4].[147] Since Moses, of blessed memory, has prohibited idol worship for all time, we know that the miracles of a would-be seducer to idolatry are wrought by trickery and sorcery. Similarly, since Moses has taught us that the Law is eternal, we definitely stamp as a prevaricator anyone who argues that it was destined to be in force for a fixed period of time, because he contravenes Moses.[148] Consequently, we do not ask him for a sign and we pay no attention to supernatural performances, which impress us as such when he performs them. Inasmuch as we believe in Moses not because of his miracles, we are under no obligation to make comparisons between his miracles and those of others. Our everlastingly firm trust and steadfast faith in him is due to the fact that we as well as he heard the divine discourse at Sinai, as He states: *And they will trust you forever* [Exod. 19:9].

This event is analogous to the situation of two witnesses who observed a certain act simultaneously. Each of them saw what his fellow

saw, and each of them is sure of the truth of his fellow's statement as well as of his own, and does not require proof or demonstration, whereas other people, to whom they would report their testimony, would not be absolutely convinced without confirmation or certification to everybody's satisfaction. Similarly, we of the Jewish faith are convinced of the truth of the prophecy of Moses, not simply because of his wonders, but because we, like him, witnessed the theophany on Mount Sinai. He performed all of the miracles only as the occasion demanded, as is recorded in Scripture. We do not give credence to the tenets of a miracle worker in the same way we trust in the truth of Moses our Teacher, nor does any analogy exist between them. This distinction is a fundamental principle of our religion, but seems to have fallen into oblivion, and has been disregarded by many of our coreligionists.[149] It is because of this reality that Solomon addressed the gentile nations on behalf of Israel: *Why will you gaze at the Shulammite in the Mahanaim dance?* [Song of Songs 7:1]. The verse means to say: "If you can produce anything like the Revelation at Sinai, then we shall concede some misgivings concerning Moses."

Now, if a Jewish or gentile prophet urges and encourages people to follow the religion of Moses without adding thereto or diminishing therefrom, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the others, we demand a miracle from him.[150] If he performs it we recognize him and bestow upon him the honor due to a prophet, but if he fails to do so he is put to death.[151] We require only a miracle as his credentials, although it may be wrought by stratagem or magic, just as we accept the evidence of witnesses although there is a possibility of perjury. It is because we are divinely commanded through Moses to render judgment in a suit of law in accordance with the testimony of two witnesses whom we believe, the possibility of false swearing notwithstanding.[152] Similarly we are enjoined to act in accordance with the declaration of one who asserts that he is a prophet provided he can substantiate his claim by miracle or proof, although there is a possibility that he is an impostor. However, He has also controlled us by teaching that if the would-be prophet gives a sign or a portent that appears credible, but he teaches tenets that negate the doctrine of Moses, we must repudiate him. This theme was made abundantly clear in the Introduction to our extensive commentary on the Mishnah, where you will find some useful infor-

mation concerning principles that form the foundation of our religion and the pillars of our faith.[153]

It is incumbent upon you to know that the rule that nothing may be added to or diminished from the laws of Moses applies equally to the Oral Law, that is, to the traditional interpretation transmitted through the sages of blessed memory. Be cautious and on your guard lest any of the heretics, may they speedily perish, mingle among you, for they are worse than apostates.[154] For, although this country as you know is a place of scholars, students, and schools,[155] they indulge in bombastic talk, but we warn our people against their occasional errors, heresies, and mistakes.[156] As for you in this distant country, although you are scholars, learned in the Law, and pious, you are few in number, may God increase your numbers and hasten the day of gathering you with the entire religious community.[157] If any of the heretics mingles among you and undertakes to corrupt the people, he will undermine the faith of the young and they will not find a savior. Beware of them, and know that it is permitted to slay them in our opinion,[158] for they repudiate the statement in the prophecy of Moses who commanded us to act *in accordance with the instructions given you and the ruling handed down to you* [Deut. 17:11].[159] In wicked defiance they assert that they believe most firmly in the prophecy of Moses, as the Muslims and Christians claim to believe,[160] yet they destroy and nullify His law and kill the adherents thereof. Whoever joins them is just like his seducer. I deem it imperative to call your attention to these facts, and to raise the young generation on these tenets, because they are a pillar of our faith.

## III

You have adverted to the computations of the date of the redemption,[161] and Rabbi Saadiah's opinion on the subject.[162] First of all, it devolves upon you to know that no human being will ever be able to determine it precisely, as Daniel has intimated: *For these words are secret and sealed* [Dan. 12:9]. Indeed many hypotheses were advanced by scholars who fancied they had discovered the date. This was anticipated in his declaration: *Many will run to and fro, and opinions will be multiple* [Dan. 12:4], that is, there will be numerous views

concerning it. Furthermore, God has communicated through His prophets that many people will calculate the time of the advent of the Messiah, but they will be disappointed and fail.[163] He also cautioned us against giving way to doubt and distrust because of these miscalculations. The longer the delay the more fervently we hope, as He states: *For there is a prophecy for a set term, a truthful witness for a time, that will come. Even if it tarries, wait for it still; for it will surely come, without delay* [Hab. 2:3].

Remember that even the date of the termination of the Egyptian exile was not precisely known and gave rise to differences of opinion. Although God fixed its duration in Scripture, where He says: *And they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years* [Gen. 15:13],[164] some reckoned the period of four hundred years from the time of Jacob's arrival in Egypt, others dated it from the beginning of Israel's bondage, which happened seventy years later, and still others computed it from the time of the Covenant of the Pieces[165] when this matter was divinely predicted to Abraham. At the expiration of four hundred years after this event, and thirty years before the appearance of Moses,[166] a band of Israelites left Egypt because they believed that their exile had ended.[167] The Egyptians slew and destroyed them, and the subjugation of the Israelites who remained was consequently aggravated, as we learn from our sages, the teachers of our national traditions. David, in fact, alluded to the vanquished Israelites who miscalculated the date of the redemption in the verse: *The Ephraimite bowmen turned back in the day of battle* [Ps. 78:9].[168]

In truth, the period of four hundred years commenced with the birth of Isaac, the true seed of Abraham as God declared: *For it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you* [Gen. 21:12].[169] This is the sense of the verse: *Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years* [Gen. 15:13].[170] The four hundred years mentioned in this forecast refer to the duration of the exile and not solely to the Egyptian bondage. This fact was misunderstood until the great prophet Moses came, when it was realized that the four hundred years dated back precisely to the birth of Isaac.[171] Now if such uncertainty prevailed in regard to the date of emancipation from the Egyptian bondage, the term of which was fixed, it is much more so with respect to

the date of the final redemption, the prolonged and protracted duration of which appalled and dismayed our inspired seers. One of them exclaimed in the form of a question: *Will You be angry with us forever, prolong Your wrath for all generations?* [Ps. 85:6].[172] Isaiah, too, alluded to the long, drawn-out exile when he said: *They shall be gathered in a dungeon as captives are gathered; and shall be locked up in a prison. But after many days they shall be remembered* [Isa. 24:22]. Inasmuch as Daniel has proclaimed the matter a deep secret, our sages have interdicted the calculation of the time of the future redemption, or the reckoning of the period of the advent of the Messiah, because the masses might be mystified and bewildered should the Messiah fail to appear as forecast. The rabbis invoked God to frustrate and destroy those who seek to determine precisely the advent of the messianic era, because they are a stumbling block to the people, and that is why they uttered the imprecation, "May the calculators of the final redemption come to grief."[173]

As for Rabbi Saadiah's calculations, there are extenuating circumstances for them though he knew they were disallowed.[174] For the Jews of his time were perplexed and misguided. The divine religion might have disappeared had he not encouraged the pusillanimous, and diffused, disseminated, and propagated by word of mouth and the pen a knowledge of its underlying principles. He believed, in all earnestness, that by means of the messianic calculations he would inspire the masses with hope to the Truth.[175] Verily all his deeds were for the sake of heaven.[176] Consequently, in view of the probity of his motives, which we have disclosed, one must not decry him for his messianic computations.[177]

I note that you are inclined to believe in astrology and the influence of the past and future conjunctions of the planets upon human affairs.[178] Dismiss such notions from your mind. Cleanse your mind of them as one cleanses dirty clothes. Accomplished gentile and certainly Jewish scholars refuse to believe in the truth of this science. Its postulates can be refuted by real proofs on rational grounds, but this is not the place to enter into a discussion of them.[179] Mark well, however, what Scripture has to say about the astrologers. At the time when Moses rose to leadership, the astrologers had unanimously predicted that our nation would never be freed from bondage, nor gain its independence.

But fortune smiled upon Israel, for the most exquisite of human beings[180] appeared and redeemed them at the very time that was supposedly most inauspicious for them. Furthermore, Egypt was smitten with the plagues at the very time for which the astrologers had foretold an epoch of wholesome climate, abundance, and prosperity for the inhabitants. To the failure of their vaticinations, Isaiah alludes when he says: *Where, indeed, are your sages? Let them tell you, let them discover what the Lord of Hosts has planned against Egypt* [Isa. 19:12].[181]

Similarly, the pundits, astrologers, and prognosticators were all of one mind that the administration of Nebuchadnezzar the wicked marked the beginning of an era of enduring prosperity. Forsooth, his dynasty was extinguished and destroyed, as was divinely forecast by Isaiah. He derided them for pretending to foreknowledge, and held up to scorn the state that fancied itself in possession of sapient folk versed in futurity. He says: *Let them stand up and help you now, the scanners of heaven, the star-gazers, who announce, month by month, whatever will come upon you* [Isa. 47:13].[182]

This is how matters stand regarding the era of the Messiah, may he speedily come. For while the gentiles believe that our nation will never constitute an independent state, nor will it ever rise above its present condition,[183] and all the astrologers, diviners, and augurs concur in this opinion, God will prove their views and beliefs false, and will order the advent of the Messiah. Isaiah makes reference to this event in the verse: *I who annul the omens of the diviners, and make fools of the augurs, who turn sages back and make nonsense of their knowledge; but confirm the word of My servant and fulfill the prediction of My messenger. It is I who say of Jerusalem, "It shall be inhabited," and of the towns of Judah, "They shall be rebuilt; and I will restore their ruined places"* [Isa. 44:25–26].[184] This is the correct view that every Israelite should hold, without paying any attention to the conjunctions of the stars, of greater and smaller magnitude.[185]

I have observed your statement that in your country science is little cultivated, and that learning does not flourish, and you attribute it to the influence of the conjunction in the earthly trigon.[186] Remember that this low state of learning and science is not peculiar to your country, but is widely prevalent in Israel today. Indeed a divine premonition of such a state of affairs through Isaiah says: *Truly, I shall*

*further baffle that people with bafflement upon bafflement; and the wisdom of its wise shall fail, and the prudence of its prudent shall vanish* [Isa. 29:14].[187]

This condition is not due to the earthly or fiery trigon, as is proved by the fact that Solomon, king of Israel, lived during the earthly trigon,[188] and yet Scripture testifies that *he was the wisest of all men* [1 Kings 5:11].[189] So did Abraham of blessed memory, who was designated the Pillar of the World,[190] discover the First Cause of the entire universe and demonstrate the central importance of the principle of the unity of God for all mankind.[191] He, Isaac, and Jacob, all three of them, carry the throne of the glory in their hearts; to make use of a rabbinical metaphor "the patriarchs are the chariot,"[192] which in turn was suggested by the verse *God rose up over him* [Gen. 35:13]. The meaning is that they have attained a true conception of the deity, yet the three patriarchs lived during the earthly trigon.

This matter will become clear if the following facts are borne in mind. There is first the smaller conjunction, that is, the meeting of Saturn with Jupiter, which occurs once in approximately twenty years. These conjunctions continue to take place twelve times within the same trigon, covering a period of two hundred and forty years. Then conjunctions take place in the second trigon; the change from one trigon to another is known as the medium conjunction. It is the conjunction of change, which occurs every two hundred and forty solar years. According to this calculation an interval of nine hundred and sixty years will elapse between the first and second meeting of two planets in the same point on the zodiac. This is termed the great conjunction, and occurs once in nine hundred and sixty years. This is the time that must elapse between the first and second meeting of Saturn and Jupiter in the same degree of Aries. If you calculate back, you will understand my statement above that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as David and Solomon, lived during the earthly trigon. My purpose in going into detail was to dispel any of your suspicions that the trigon exercises any influence upon human affairs.[193]

Furthermore you write that some people have figured out the forthcoming conjunction and have determined that all of the seven planets will meet in one of the constellations of the zodiac. This is an untrue forecast by the one who told you this.[194] There will simply not be a

seven-planet conjunction, either in the next meeting or in the following ones. Such an event will not happen even in ten thousand years, as is well known to those who are familiar with the astronomical law of equation. Verily, this is the calculation of an ignorant person, as is evinced by another remark of his, quoted by you, to the effect that there will be a deluge of air and dust.[195] It is essential for you to know that these and similar assertions are fabricated and mendacious. Do not consider a statement true only because you find it in a book, for the prevaricator is as little restrained with his pen as with his tongue.[196] The untutored and the uninstructed are convinced of the veracity of a statement by the mere fact that it is written; nevertheless, its accuracy must be demonstrated in another manner.

Remember that a blind person submits to an individual having power of sight for intelligent direction, knowing that he lacks the vision to guide himself safely; and an ailing person, unskilled in the art of medicine and uninformed as to matters detrimental or beneficial to his health, defers to a physician for guidance and obeys him implicitly. Just so, it is indispensable for the laity to yield unswervingly to the prophets, who were men of insight, and to limit themselves to what they teach them regarding the truth or error of any given matter. Next in importance are the sages who have studied the dogmas, doctrines, and views of our faith day and night, and have learned to distinguish between the genuine and the spurious.

After this exposition you may trust me that the statements you have previously quoted are inaccurate, and this applies equally to similar views that you heard expressed in conversation or have met in books. For the author of such sayings is either ignorant, a mountebank, or seeks to destroy the Law and demolish its bulwarks. Do you not realize the brazenness of these people who assert that there will be a deluge of air, and dust, and fire, in order to deceive and delude others to believe that the Deluge was merely due to a concentration of water,[197] and was not brought on by God to punish the immorality of the time, as is explicitly related in Scripture, which guides us against error and fallacy?[198] Similarly Sodom and the other cities were not destroyed because of their unbelief and the wickedness of their inhabitants, in direct contradiction to the Bible, which says: *I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has*

*come to Me; if not, I will take note* [Gen. 18:21].[199] So whatever happens in this world that has its source in God, they say it is the inescapable consequences of planetary conjunctions.

They have affirmed the truth of their propositions in order to undermine the principles of our religion, and to give free rein to their animal instincts and passions as do the beasts and the ostriches. We have been admonished by God against those views in Scripture to the following effect: "If you rebel against Me so that I bring disaster upon you as a punishment of your misdeeds, but you ascribe your reverses to chance rather than to your guilt, I shall increase your afflictions and make them more grievous."[200] This is the intent of His words in the Chapter of Admonitions: *If you remain* be-keri *toward Me, I too will remain* be-keri *to you* [Lev. 26:27–28]. Now *keri* signifies chance, hazard. It means to say: "If you regard My chastisement as a fortuitous event, I shall bring the most severe calamities upon you, *sevenfold for your sins*" [Lev. 26:21].[201] These foregoing remarks have made it abundantly clear that the advent of the Messiah is in no way subject to the influence of the stars.

Indeed one of our keen minds in the province of Andalusia calculated by means of astrology the date of the final redemption, and predicted the coming of the Messiah in a particular year.[202] Every one of our distinguished scholars made little of his declaration, discounted what he did, and censured him sharply for it. But grim fate dealt more sternly with him than we could have. For at the very time the Messiah was supposed to arrive, a rebel leader rose in the Maghreb who issued an order of conversion. As you are well aware, the event proved to be a great debacle for the partisans of this prognosticator. Indeed, the hardships experienced by our people in the Diaspora are responsible for these extravagances, for a drowning man catches at a straw.[203]

Now, my coreligionists, you *be strong and of good courage, all you who wait for the Lord* [Ps. 31:25]. Strengthen one another, affirm your faith in the Expected One, may he speedily appear in your midst. *Strengthen the hands that are slack, make firm the tottering knees* [Isa. 35:3]. Remember, God has informed us through Isaiah, the herald of the nation, that the prolongation of the adversities of exile will impel many of our people to believe that God has relinquished and abandoned us—far be it from Him—but He assured us that He would not

abandon and would not relinquish us for He declared: *Zion says, "The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." Can a woman forget her baby, or disown the child of her womb? Though she might forget, I never could forget you* [Isa. 49:14–15]. God had already divulged this through the First Prophet, saying: *For the Lord your God is a compassionate God: He will not fail you nor will He let you perish* [Deut. 4:31], and also: *Then the Lord your God, will restore your fortunes and take you back in love* [Deut. 30:3].

It is, my coreligionists, one of the fundamental articles of the Jewish faith that most surely the future redeemer of Israel will spring only from the stock of Solomon son of David.[204] He will gather our nation, assemble our exile, redeem us from our degradation, propagate the true religion, and exterminate his opponents, as God promised us in the Torah: *What I see for them is not yet, what I behold will not be soon: a star rises from Jacob, a meteor comes forth from Israel; it smashes the brow of Moab, the foundation of all children of Seth. Edom becomes a possession* [Num. 24:17–18].[205] The hour of his arrival will be at a time of great catastrophe and dire misfortune for Israel, as was predicted in the verse: *And neither bond nor free is left* [Deut. 32:36].[206] Then God will bring him forth and he will fulfill the promises made in his behalf. A later prophet too was alluding to the messianic tribulations when he declared: *But who can endure the day of his coming?* [Mal. 3:2].[207] This is the proper belief that one must hold.

From the prophecies of Daniel and Isaiah and from the statements of our sages it is clear that the advent of the Messiah will take place some time subsequent to the universal expansion of the Roman and Arab empires, which is an actuality today. This fact is true beyond question or doubt. Daniel is the last prophet to portray the kingdom of the Arabs, the rise of Muhammad, and then the arrival of the Messiah.[208] Similarly, Isaiah intimated that the coming of the Messiah will occur after the rise of the Madman, for he says: *Riders on asses, riders on camels, horsemen in pairs* [Isa. 21:7,9].[209] Now the rider on ass is the Messiah, as is evident from the verse, which describes him as *humble, riding on an ass* [Zech. 9:9].[210] He will follow the man riding a camel, that is the Arab kingdom.[211] The statement *horsemen in pairs* refers to the two empires Edom and Ishmael. A similar interpretation of Daniel's vision concerning the image and the beasts[212] is

correct beyond doubt. They are conclusions drawn from the plain meaning of the text.

The precise date of the messianic advent cannot be known. But I am in possession of an extraordinary tradition that I received from my father, who in turn received it from his father,[213] going back to our early ancestors who were exiled from Jerusalem, as the prophet testified: *and the exiles of Jerusalem that are in Spain* [Obad. 1:20].[214] The tradition is that a covert indication lies in the prediction of Balaam to the future restoration of prophecy in Israel. Incidentally,[215] it may be stated that there are other verses in the Torah that contain cryptic indications in addition to their simple meaning. For example, the word *rdu* in the remark of Jacob to his sons: *go down . . . there (rdu shamah)* [Gen. 42:2] has the numerical value of 210 and contains a hint as to the length of Israel's stay in Egypt.[216] Likewise, the statement of Moses our teacher: *Should you, when you have begotten children and children's children and are long established in the land . . .* [Deut. 4:25] [217] embodies a reference to the duration of Israel's stay in the land of Israel, from the time of their arrival to the exile in the time of Yehoiakin, that is, 840 years, corresponding to the numerical value of the word *vnoshantem*[218] (and are long established). We find many others like them.[219] By this method of cryptic allusion it was transmitted to me that Balaam's statement: *Jacob is told at once (ka'et), yea Israel, what God has planned* [Num. 23:23],[220] contains a veiled hint as to the date of the restoration of prophecy to Israel. The sentence means that after the lapse of an interval equal to the time that passed from the six days of creation to Balaam's day, seers will again tell Israel what God has planned. Now Balaam uttered his prediction in the thirty-eighth year after the Exodus, which corresponds to the year 2485 after the creation of the world, for the Exodus took place in the beginning of the year 2448.[221] It is doubtless true that the reappearance of prophecy in Israel is one of the signs betokening the approach of the messianic era, as is stated: *After that I will pour out My spirit upon all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy. . .* [Joel 3:1].[222] This is the most reliable tradition concerning the advent of the Messiah. I call it reliable, although I have admonished against it, and strictly prohibited blazoning it abroad, lest some people deem it unduly

postponed. I have already apprised you concerning it, but God best knows what is true.[223]

Your statement that the time of the advent of the Messiah is indicated by Jeremiah, who said: *It is a time of trouble for Jacob, but he shall be delivered from it* [Jer. 30:7],[224] is incorrect. For it must refer to the war of Gog and Magog, which will take place some time after the oncoming of the Messiah.[225] Some of the supposed signs, such as the Gate of Gerson and others, are very doubtful.[226] Some are wrongly ascribed to the sages, while others owe their origin to figures of speech and enigmatic sayings which should not be literally taken.

## IV

You write that a certain man in one of the cities of Yemen pretends that he is the Messiah.[227] As I live, I am not surprised at him or at his followers, for I have no doubt that he is mad, and a sick person should not be rebuked or reproved for an illness brought on by no fault of his own. Neither am I surprised at his votaries, because they were persuaded by him owing to their sorry plight, their ignorance of the importance and high rank of the Messiah, and their mistaken comparison of the Messiah with ibn Mahdi,[228] whose rise they are witnessing. But I am astonished that you, a scholar who has carefully studied the doctrine of the rabbis, are inclined to repose faith in him.[229] Do you not know, my brother, that the Messiah is a very eminent prophet, more illustrious than all the prophets after Moses? Do you not know that a false pretender to prophecy is to suffer capital punishment for having arrogated to himself unwarranted distinction, just as the person who prophesied in the name of the idols is put to death? For God says: *But any prophet who presumes to speak in My name an oracle which I did not command him to utter, or who speaks in the name of other gods—that prophet shall die* [Deut. 18:20].[230] What stronger evidence exists than his very pretensions to be the Messiah that he is a liar?

How odd is your remark about this man, that he is renowned for his meekness and a little wisdom. Do these characteristics make him a Messiah? You were beguiled by him because you have not considered

the preeminence of the Messiah, the manner and place of his appearance, and the marks by which he is to be identified. The Messiah indeed ranks above all prophets after Moses in eminence and distinction, and God has bestowed some gifts upon him that he did not bestow upon Moses, as may be gathered from the following verses: *He shall sense the truth by his reverence for the Lord* [Isa. 11:3]; *The spirit of the Lord shall alight upon him* [Isa. 11:2]; *Justice shall be the girdle of his loins* [Isa. 11:5].[231] God has conferred upon him six appellations in the verse: *For a child has been born to us, a son has been given us. And authority has settled on his shoulders. He has been named "the Mighty God is planning grace; the Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler" (Pele, Yoetz, El, Gibbor, Aviad, Sar-shalom)* [Isa. 9:5].[232] He continues to magnify him, and declares: *You are My son; I have fathered you this day* [Ps. 2:7].[233] All these statements demonstrate the superiority of the Messiah to all the descendants of Adam.

Transcendent wisdom is a *sine qua non* for inspiration. It is an article of our faith that the gift of prophecy is vouchsafed only to the wise, the strong, and the rich. Strong is defined as the ability to control one's passions.[234] Rich signifies wealthy in knowledge. Now if we dare not put trust in a man's pretensions to prophecy if he does not excel in wisdom, how much less must we take seriously the claims of an ignoramus that he is the Messiah. That the man in question is untutored is evident from the order he issued to the people to give away, as you state, all their possessions for eleemosynary purposes. They did right in disobeying him, and he was wrong inasmuch as he disregarded the Jewish law concerning almsgiving. Scripture says: *But of all that a man owns, be it man or beast or land of his holding, nothing that he has proscribed for the Lord may be sold or redeemed* [Lev. 27:28]. The rabbis explain, in their comment on this verse, "part of all that he owns, but not all that he has."[235] The sages accordingly set bounds to the bounty of the beneficent in an explicit ruling, which reads: "He who is inclined to be liberal with the poor, may not part with more than a fifth of his possessions."[236] There is no doubt that the reasoning that led him to claim that he is the Messiah induced him to issue a command to his fellowmen to give away their property and distribute it to the poor. But then the affluent would become destitute and vice

versa. According to his ordinance it would be necessary for the *nouveaux riches* to return their recently acquired property to the newly impoverished. Such a regulation, which would keep property moving in a circle, is the peak of folly.

As to the place where the Messiah will make his first appearance, He informs us that he will first present himself only in the land of Israel as is stated: *He will suddenly come to His temple* [Mal. 3:1].[237] As to the how of his advent, nothing at all will be known about it before it occurs. The Messiah is not a person concerning whom it may be predicted that he will be the son of so-and-so, or of the family of so-and-so. On the contrary, he will be unknown before his coming, but he will prove by means of miracles and wonders that he is the true Messiah. In allusion to his mysterious lineage, God says: *Behold a man whose name is the Shoot, and who shall shoot up* [Zech. 6:12].[238] Similarly Isaiah, referring to his arrival, implies that neither his father nor mother, nor his kith and kin will be known, for he will grow, by his favor, like a sapling, like a root out of arid ground [Isa. 53:2].[239] After his manifestation in Palestine, Israel will be gathered in Jerusalem and the other cities of Palestine. Then the tidings will spread to the East and to the West until it will reach Yemen and those beyond you in India, as we learn from Isaiah: *Go, swift messengers, to a nation far and remote, to a people thrust forth and away . . . which sends out envoys by sea, in papyrus vessels upon the water* [Isa. 18:2].[240] The redemption will not be reversed so that it will appear in distant lands first, and ultimately reach Palestine.[241]

What the great powers are that all the prophets from Moses to Malachi ascribe to the Messiah may be inferred from various statements in the twenty-four books of Scripture. The most significant of them is that the report of his advent will strike terror into the hearts of all the kings of the earth, and their kingdoms will fall; neither will they be able to war or revolt against him. They will neither defame nor calumniate him, for the miracles he will perform will frighten them into complete silence. Isaiah refers to the submission of the kings to him in the verse: *Kings shall be silenced because of him* [Isa. 52:15].[242] He will slay whom he will by the word of his mouth, none will escape or be saved, as is written: *He shall strike down a land with the rod of*

*his mouth* [Isa. 11:4].[243] Revolution and war in the entire world, from East to West, will not cease at the beginning of the messianic era, but only after the wars of Gog and Magog, as was indicated by Ezekiel.[244]

I do not believe that this man who has appeared among you possesses these powers. You know that the Christians falsely ascribe marvelous powers to Jesus the Nazarene, may his bones be ground to dust, such as the resurrection of the dead and other miracles. Even if we granted this for the sake of argument, we should not be convinced by their reasoning that Jesus is the Messiah. For we can bring a thousand proofs from Scripture that it is not so even from their point of view.[245] Indeed, will anyone arrogate this rank to himself unless he wishes to make himself a laughing stock?

In sum, had this man acted presumptuously or disdainfully, I would deem him worthy of death.[246] The truth seems to be that he became melancholy and lost his mind. In my opinion, it is most advisable, both for your good and for his, that you put him in iron chains for a while, until the gentiles learn that he is demented. After you have blazoned and bruited abroad the intelligence concerning this man among them, you may release him without endangering his safety. If the gentiles gain knowledge about him after he has been locked up by you, they will taunt him and pronounce him irrational, and you will remain unmolested by him. If you procrastinate until they learn of this affair of their own accord, you will most likely incur their wrath. Remember, my coreligionists, that on account of the vast number of our sins God has hurled us into the midst of this people, the Arabs, who have persecuted us severely, and passed baneful and discriminatory legislation against us, as God has forewarned us: *Our enemies themselves shall judge us* [Deut. 32:31].[247] Never did a nation molest, degrade, debase, and hate us as much as they.[248] Therefore, when David king of Israel of blessed memory, inspired by the Holy Spirit, envisaged the future tribulations of Israel, he bewailed and lamented their lot only in the kingdom of Ishmael, and prayed on their behalf for their deliverance in the verse: *Woe is me, that I live with Meshekh, that I dwell among the clans of Kedar* [Ps. 120:5].[249] Note the distinction between Kedar and the children of Ishmael, for the Madman is of the lineage of the children of Kedar, as they readily admit.[250] Daniel also alludes to our humiliation and degradation *like the dust in*

*threshing* [2 Kings 13:7],[251] suffered only at the hands of the Arabs, may they be speedily vanquished, when he says: *And it made fall to the earth some of the host, yea of the stars, some of which it trampled* [Dan. 8:10].[252] Although we are dishonored by them beyond human endurance, and have to put up with their fabrications, we yet behave like him of whom the prophet said: *But I am like a deaf man, unhearing, like a dumb man who cannot speak up* [Ps. 38:14].[253] Similarly, our sages instructed us to bear the prevarications and lies of Ishmael in silence. They found it in a cryptic allusion to this attitude in the names of his sons, Mishma, Dumah, and Massa,[254] which have been interpreted to mean *listen, be silent,* and *endure*. We have acquiesced, both young and old, to inure ourselves to humiliation, as Isaiah instructed us: *I offered my back to the floggers, and my cheeks to those who tore out my hair* [Isa. 50:6].[255] All this notwithstanding, we do not escape this continued maltreatment and pressure, which well-nigh crush us. No matter how much we suffer and elect to remain at peace with them, they stir up strife and sedition, as David describes: *I am all peace; but when I speak, they are for war* [Ps. 120:7].[256] Most certainly therefore if we start trouble, and claim power from them absurdly and preposterously, we surely give ourselves up to destruction.

I shall now succinctly narrate several episodes to you, subsequent to the rise of the Arab kingdom, from which you will derive some benefit.[257] One of these is the exodus of a multitude of Jews, numbering hundreds of thousands from the East beyond Isfahan, led by an individual who pretended to be the Messiah.[258] They were accoutred with military equipment and drawn swords, and slew all those that encountered them. According to the information I received, they reached the vicinity of Baghdad. This happened in the beginning of the reign of the Omayyads.[259]

The king then said to all the Jews of his kingdom: "Let your scholars go out to meet this multitude and ascertain whether their pretensions are true, and he is unmistakably your expected one. If so, we shall conclude peace with you under any conditions you may prefer. But if it is dissimulation, I shall wage war against them." When the sages met these Jews, the latter declared: "We belong to the children of the district beyond the River."[260] Then they asked them: "Who instigated

you to make this uprising?" Thereupon they replied: "This man here, one of the descendants of David, whom we know to be pious and virtuous, this man whom we knew to be a leper at night, arose the following morning healthy and sound." They believed that leprosy was one of the characteristics of the Messiah, to which they found an allusion in the verse: *plagued, smitten and afflicted by God* [Isa. 53:4],[261] that is, by leprosy. The sages explained to them that this interpretation was incorrect, and that he lacked even one of the traits of the Messiah, let alone all of them. Furthermore, they advised them as follows: "O brethren, you are still near your native country and have the possibility of returning there. If you remain in this land you will not only perish, but also undermine the teachings of Moses, by misleading the people to believe that the Messiah has appeared, and has been vanquished, whereas you have neither a prophet in your midst, nor an omen betokening his oncoming." They were persuaded by these arguments. The sultan turned over to them so-and-so thousands of dinars by way of hospitality in order that they should leave his country. But after they returned home he had a change of heart with respect to the Jews, upon whom he imposed a fine for his expenditures. He ordered them to make a special mark on their garments,[262] the writing of the word *cursed,* and to attach one iron bar in the back and one in the front. Ever since then the communities of Khurasan and Isfahan have experienced the tribulations of the Diaspora. This episode we have learned from oral records.[263]

The following incident we have verified and know to be true, because it occurred in recent times.[264] About fifty years ago or less, a pious and virtuous man by the name of Moses al-Darri came from Darral[265] to the province of Andalusia to study under Rabbi Joseph ha-Levi ibn Migash,[266] of blessed memory, of whom you have very likely heard. Later he left for Fez, the center of the Maghreb. People flocked to him because of his piety, virtue, and learning. He informed them that the Messiah was about to come, as was divinely revealed to him in a dream. Yet he did not pretend on the basis of a divine communication, as did the former lunatic, that he was the Messiah. He merely affirmed that the Messiah would appear. Many people became his adherents and put their faith in him. My father and master, of blessed memory, endeavored to dissuade and discourage people

from following him. However, only a few were influenced by my father, while most, nay, nearly all clung to R. Moses. Finally he predicted events that would come true no matter what was going to occur. He would say: "I was informed yesterday that this and this would happen," and it did happen exactly as he predicted. Once he foretold a vehement rain for the coming Friday and that the falling drops would be blood. This was considered a sign of the approaching advent of the Messiah, of which the text says: "*I will set portents in the sky and on earth, blood and fire and pillars of smoke*" [Joel 3:3].[267] This episode took place in the month of Marḥeshvan.[268] A very heavy rain fell that Friday and the fluids that descended were red and viscous as if mixed with clay. This miracle convinced all the people that he was undoubtedly a prophet. In itself it is not inconsistent with the tenets of the Torah, for prophecy, as I have explained, will return to Israel before the messianic advent. When the majority of the people put their trust in him, he predicted that the Messiah would come that very year on Passover eve. He advised the people to sell their property and contract debts to the Muslims with the promise to pay back ten dinars for one, in order to observe the precepts of the Torah in connection with the Passover festival, for they would never see them again, and so they did. When Passover came and nothing transpired, the people were ruined, as most of them had disposed of their property for a trifling sum, and were overwhelmed with debt. When the gentiles in the vicinity and their serfs learned of this hoax they were minded to do away with him, were they to locate him. As this Muslim country no longer offered him protection, he left for Palestine where he died, may his memory be blessed. When he left he made predictions, as I was told by those who saw him, concerning events both great and small in the Maghreb, which were later fulfilled.[269]

My father of blessed memory told me that about fifteen or twenty years before that episode, some respectable people in Cordova, the center of Andalusia, among whom a number were given to the cult of astrology, were all of one mind that the Messiah would appear that year. They sought a revelation in a dream night after night,[270] and ascertained that the Messiah was a man of the city. They picked a pious and virtuous person by the name of ibn Arieh, who had been instructing the people. They wrought miracles and made predictions

just as al-Darri did, until they won over the hearts of all the people. When the influential and learned men of our community heard of this, they assembled in the synagogue, had ibn Arieh brought there, and had him flogged in public. Furthermore, they imposed a fine on him and put him under the ban, because by his silence he gave assent to the professions of his adherents, instead of restraining them and pointing out to them that they were contradicting our religion. They did the same thing to the persons who assembled about him. The Jews escaped the wrath of the gentiles only with the greatest difficulty.[271]

About forty years preceding the affair of ibn Arieh in Andalusia, a man of Linon,[272] a large center in the heart of France, which numbered ten thousand Jews, pretended that he was the Messiah. He was supposed to have performed the following miracle. On moonlit nights he would go out and climb to the top of high trees in the field and glide from tree to tree like a bird. He cited a verse from Daniel to prove that such a miracle was within the power of the Messiah: *And, behold, there came with the clouds of heaven one like . . . a man . . . and there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom* [Dan. 7:13–14].[273] Many who witnessed the miracle became his votaries. The French discovered this, pillaged, and put many of his followers to death, together with the pretender. Some of them maintain however that he is still in hiding until this very day.[274]

The prophets have predicted and instructed us, as I have told you, that pretenders and simulators will appear in great numbers at the time when the advent of the true Messiah will draw nigh, but they will not be able to make good their claim. They will perish with many of their partisans. Solomon of blessed memory, inspired by the Holy Spirit, foresaw that the prolonged duration of the exile would incite some of our people to seek to terminate it before the appointed time, and as a consequence they would perish or meet with disaster. Therefore he admonished them and adjured them in metaphorical language to desist, as we read: *I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem, by gazelles or by hinds of the field: do not wake or rouse love until it please* [Song of Songs 2:7].[275] Now, brethren and friends, abide by the oath, and stir not up love until it pleases.

May God, who created the world with the attribute of mercy,[276]

grant us to behold the ingathering of the exiles to the portion of His inheritance, to contemplate the graciousness of the Lord, and to visit early in His temple.[277] May He take us out from the Valley of the Shadow of Death wherein He put us. May He remove darkness from our eyes and gloom from our hearts. May He fulfill in our days as well as in yours the contents of the verse: *The people that walked in darkness have seen a brilliant light* [Isa. 9:1].[278] May He darken our opponents in His anger and wrath, may He illuminate our obscurity, as He promised us: *Behold! Darkness shall cover the earth, and thick clouds the peoples; but upon you the Lord will shine* [Isa. 60:2].[279]

Greetings unto you, my dear friend, master of the sciences, and paragon of learning, and unto our erudite colleagues, and unto all the rest of the people.[280] Peace, peace, as the light shines, and much peace until the moon be no more.[281] Amen.

I beg you to send a copy of this missive to every community in the cities and hamlets, in order to strengthen the people in their faith and put them on their feet. Read it at public gatherings and in private, and you will thus become a public benefactor. Take adequate precautions lest its contents be divulged by an evil person and mishap overtake us. (God spare us therefrom.)[282] When I began writing this letter I had some misgivings about it, but they were overruled by my conviction that the public welfare takes precedence over one's personal safety. Moreover, I am sending it to a personage such as you: *The counsel of the Lord is for those who fear Him* [Ps. 25:14].[283] Our sages, the successors of the prophets,[284] assured us that persons engaged in a religious mission will meet with no disaster.[285] What more important religious mission is there than this! Peace be unto all Israel. Amen.

## NOTES

1. Jacob, the head of the Jewish community in Yemen, is an unknown figure except for what Maimonides tells of him in this epistle. In this epistle, sent to Jacob, Maimonides praises him for scholarship and leadership. Jacob's father, Nathanel, leader of the community before him, wrote the *Garden of Intelligences*, a philosophic and theological tract. More on Nathanel can be found in J. Kafiḥ, *Iggerot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1972), pp. 11–15.

2. This is one of the few instances where a long genealogy of the ancestry

of the celebrated Maimonides is found, and tradition maintains that it goes back to R. Judah ha-Nasi (second and third centuries C.E.), who compiled the Mishnah. Maimonides himself usually signed his own name and his father's name.

3. In this sentence, Maimonides succeeded in heaping praises on both father and son.

4. In rabbinic literature water is a metaphor for Torah, e.g., in BT Ta'anit 7a, and the implication is that Jewish learning is stored with Jacob and his father.

5. Based on Job 6:20, referring to the paucity of water, a problem faced by caravans.

6. R. Ashi (335–427/28 C.E.) is accepted as the compiler and editor of the Babylonian Talmud.

7. Traditional writers usually find support in the Bible for declarations they make from verses that are, in fact, out of context. Yemen, however, is in *the end of the earth*.

8. Maimonides may be referring to his brief stay in Palestine on his way to Egypt in 1165–66.

9. Nathanel, Jacob's father, whose death can be dated approximately to 1165.

10. One of the blessings on Israel when it is obedient to God.

11. Note Maimonides' humility, even if it is *pro forma*.

12. Maimonides expresses graphically how he wandered from his native Spain to Fez, to Palestine, and finally to Egypt. One wonders whether his allusion to Ps. 27:4 indicates that he entertained thoughts of settling in Palestine or only visiting it.

13. It is instructive to bear in mind that by the time he composed this epistle he had to his credit the masterly commentary to the Mishnah, which, as he informs us at the end of the work, he began at the age of twenty-three and completed when he was thirty (in 1168).

14. It is not possible to identify this friend and disciple. In his collected responsa the name "Shelomo" appears a few times.

15. The epistle thus far is phrased in florid Hebrew.

16. One may legitimately ask what the degree of literacy was in Yemen.

17. He is 'Abd al-Nabi' ibn Mahdi who c. 1170 conquered most of Yemen. He was defeated in a battle in 1173, and had to fortify himself in his castle in Zabid. During his years in power he was highly honored (one of the historians of Yemen reports that he was paid more honor than Muhammad). He tended toward extremism, which explains his decree against non-Muslims.

18. Maimonides refers to the religious persecution in Morocco initiated by the Berber Almohads, which was in force from the 1150s to 1180s. It was there that the *Epistle on Martyrdom* was composed. In the Hebrew and Arabic the Berbers are designated Canaanites.

19. The capture of Ai is described in this passage.

20. This is Amos's reaction to the second of the five visions of disaster he was shown.

21. It is too serious an event to be considered one of many.

22. The rise of the Messiah will be preceded by dreadful woes, called by this term in the BT Sanhedrin 97a–98b, where the reaction of a few rabbis to the miserable situation is: "May I not see them come."

23. Part of the description of the overthrow of the Babylonians by the Medes.

24. One of the concluding verses in Balaam's predictions of the future.

25. In the last admonition of the angel to Daniel.

26. In the account of the outrages by the wicked ruler.

27. Maimonides is about to present his view of the situation, ways to cope with it, and a sober understanding of what is wrong and what is right, what true and what false. This is the reason he urges them to read this epistle attentively and to convey its contents to their families.

28. Moses is the master of all the prophets, both those who preceded him, like Adam and Abraham, and those who followed him, down to Malachi. In the *Guide* 2:45 Maimonides, who classifies all the prophets into eleven groups, specifically excludes Moses from any group. Maimonides regarded Moses as qualitatively different because he was endowed with characteristics unique to him (also see *MT Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 7:6).

29. The Biblical text continues: *but it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath He made to your fathers . . .* [Deut. 7:8].

30. This is part of the introduction to the description of the theophany.

31. The rabbis related the name *Sinai* to the word *sin'ah*—hatred (BT Shabbat 89a–b). They date the hostility to the gentiles from the time of Revelation. Maimonides argues that the tension between Israel and the larger world became a factor from the time of the Revelation.

32. Amalek: Exod. 17:8–13; Sisera: Judg. 4–5; Sennacherib: 2 Kings 18:13–19:37; Nebuchadnezzar: 2 Kings chaps. 24–25; Titus: BT Gittin 56bf.; Hadrian: Genesis Rabbah 63:7.

33. Maimonides correctly differentiates between those who resorted to the sword, and those who employed other means. He refers to the anti-Jewish decrees of Antiochus IV. It is doubtful that he knew the anti-Jewish writings by Greek and Roman authors, such as Manetho or Cicero (cf. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* I, 62ff. and 193ff.) But he was acquainted with Galen's disparagement of Moses, as can be learned from his refutation of him in his monograph *Pirkei Moshe* (see Kafiḥ l.c., 152ff.).

34. The conclusion of one of the predictions of comfort by the prophet Isaiah.

35. Literally, the *Truth*. For its use in the Koran as an appellation of God see *Encyclopedia of Islam*$^2$, III, s.v. "Hakk," and *Lexicon of Islam*, s.v. "Hakk."

36. David, the traditionally accepted author of Psalms, is not ordinarily called a prophet (in *Guide* 2:45, Maimonides does not classify him as a full-fledged prophet), but a saint.

37. The first verse is the call of the enemies, and God's retort follows.

38. Of the first type of antagonists, all but the last two oppressed the Jews

in their homeland, while Titus and Hadrian were Roman emperors in whose days there were diasporas. There were also activities of literary anti-Semites.

39. Both Christians and Muslims, of whom we are about to read, engaged in polemics with the Jews and also in persecution and forced conversion.

40. This is an interesting psychological observation.

41. This word in Hebrew is the ordinary term for Christian. In this place, however, in view of Maimonides' reasoning, the rendering *Nazarene* is more appropriate. The following malediction is rabbinic, and can be used for any individual condemned by tradition.

42. BT Yevamot 45a and Kiddushin 68b.

43. I.e., it is a popular term, not a tradition. It appears in the medieval biography of Jesus as told by Jews. See S. Krauss, ed., *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin: S. Calvery, 1902), p. 39.

44. They condemned him to death. In BT Sanhedrin, in a passage censored by Christian officials, it is reported that he was hanged on the day before Passover. See Kafiḥ 22, note 31. This is confirmed by John's Gospel, but the other gospels date it on the first day of Passover.

45. In *MT Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:5 (originally censored), Maimonides likewise states that the verse refers to him. This was the consensus of rabbinic, and even of Karaite commentators to Daniel.

46. The assertion is explicit. Jesus was called the founder of a new religion some centuries after his death by "the descendants of Esau," i.e., the Romans, but he had nothing to do with it, and never considered it; and what he did was not a source of harm to Israel. This history of the rise of Christianity was current among Jewish writers in medieval times.

47. The fact seems to be that he was convicted by the Jewish court, but the Romans executed him by crucifixion.

48. It has been pointed out that in the Bible true prophets and others are sometimes called "mad" (see Hos. 9:7 and 2 Kings 9:11). But the nickname attached to Muhammad is either an expression of disparagement, or is based on the general view in ancient Arabia that a poet was a madman, and hence the prophet's nickname. In fact Muhammad challenges this epithet (cf. Koran, Surah 15:6, 44:13ff., 52:29ff., etc.). Jews probably seized on it for their own purposes. However, it may be that Maimonides did not use this term and it was introduced by a copyist who was accustomed to this appellation. The title of the sacred book of Islam, the Koran, was likewise perverted to *Kalon* ("disgrace").

49. Maimonides correctly links this ambition for power as a motive with his religious fervor, especially after his flight from Mecca to Medina in 622 with hundreds of his followers.

50. The most interesting explanation of the similarities between the fundamentals of the Jewish faith and those of its two daughters, which Maimonides is about to develop, was adumbrated by a Palestinian sage in the fourth century and expanded by an eleventh-century scholar, Judah ben Barzillai. He interprets Hos. 8:12: *The many teachings I wrote for him have been treated as something alien,* to mean that the Christians have taken the Torah and claim that it is their own, since they maintain they are the true Israel. And

God wonders: Shall I write down the hidden meanings (the Oral Law), which the Christians might get to know as well, and claim that they also are for them? Let these laws be treated as strange, so that they will not appropriate them. Cf. his commentary to *Sefer Yetzirah* 5–6.

51. This differentiation between the real and the artificial was also made by the poet and thinker Judah Halevi in *Kuzari* 3:9 and by Maimonides' son Abraham in his commentary to the Torah on Exodus 19:6.

52. Note should be taken of this distinction made by the Jewish Law.

53. The doctrines of the philosophers in the Middle Ages was that immortality was limited to the mind to the extent that it was actualized through the acquirement of intelligibles, i.e., knowledge of the theoretical and the practical.

54. It is important to remember that the derision and ridicule could be indulged in by Jews only privately, or they would suffer physical punishment. But the adherents of each of the other faiths takes its own very seriously and hurls attacks at the other and at Judaism.

55. In Dan. 2 and 7 the subject is the four kingdoms that will rise successively, followed by the triumph of the Law of God and of His people. Before the rise of Islam, the four kingdoms were identified as Babylonia, Persia, Macedonia (Greece), and Rome. Jews who lived in the Islamic domain counted it as the fourth kingdom, either by including it with Rome or by joining Greece and Rome as the third. It is not easy to determine from the passage cited and interpreted by Maimonides which of the two approaches he adopted, unless his comment that the state that the heavenly King will overthrow consists of Rome, Byzantium, and Persia suggests his understanding of the verse. It may be that he is guided by the existence of these empires in his time.

56. The story is narrated in Dan. 3 that an edict ordered the people to bow down to an idol at a given time, and the three Jews disobeyed. They were thrown into a red-hot furnace, but came out unscathed.

57. See *Bet ha-Midrash*, ed. A. Jellinek (Leipzig, 1853; reprint ed. Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1947), 133, 137, 139, 143; Genesis Rabbah 2:5. The *Scroll of Antiochus* speaks only of the Sabbath, new moon, and circumcision.

58. The number fifty-two is a frequent approximation in the Bible (2 Kings 15:2,27; Ezra 2:29) and in postbiblical compilations. Actually, Greek control lasted fifty-seven years.

59. E.g., BT Berakhot 61b; BT Ketubbot 50b.

60. E.g., BT Berakhot 61b.

61. E.g., BT Ketubbot 3b.

62. In God's revelation to Jacob when Jacob dreamt he saw a ladder.

63. Genesis Rabbah 41:12 and 49:3.

64. Although the theme of the vision is the fall of Babylon to the Elamites and Medes, Maimonides unhesitatingly reads into it a forecast of the fate of enemies of the Jews at all times.

65. It is the second of the predictions that begins with *See, a time is coming*.

66. The consoling conclusion to the long list of maledictions in this chapter.

67. The same verse is used by Maimonides in *Guide* 1:34, for the few who are not theologically confused.

68. Literally, "heard the words from the Almighty." According to tradition, the first two of the Ten Commandments were heard directly from God, and the others reached them through the mediation of Moses.

69. The rabbis were impressed by their haste in answering *we will do* before *we will obey* (lit. *listen*).

70. The context of the quoted verse is *but with overt acts, it is for us and our children ever to apply all the provisions of this Teaching*.

71. BT Nedarim 20a. This talmudic statement (also in JT Kiddushin chapter 4, Halakhah 1) is directed against those who know no shame. Since bashfulness is one of the characteristics of the Jew, Maimonides probably counts in this group people who entertain doubts regarding the religion that came to us through the mediation of Moses.

72. The Arabic reads *your word* (the same word is also in the preceding paragraph), but two medieval translations treated it as a mistake for the word that means *your community*, and this appears to be correct.

73. Particular attention should be paid to the fundamentals of Judaism that Maimonides spells out: the uniqueness of Moses and the eternal validity of the Torah. They are included in the thirteen articles of faith that Maimonides appended to his introduction to chapter 10 in the Mishnah Sanhedrin.

74. We speak of *one* book, when there are many, or of *one* as the first number. Neither is appropriate to God, who is One, incomparable, alone.

75. The Arabic term *kalim allah* is also the epithet of Moses in the Koran.

76. Maimonides marks the beginning and end by giving the first word of the Torah and the last three.

77. In his differentiation between the sources of other prophets and the position of Moses. Cf. *Guide* 2:35, 39.

78. The verse continues: *when the Lord said to Me: "Gather the people to Me that I may let them hear My words, in order that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children."* In the tradition, Horeb is a synonym for Sinai.

79. Maimonides does not mean to suggest that the Revelation and the theophany were for the sole purpose of giving them the strength to remain steadfast, but that this was given them along with the faith to which they cling despite all adversity.

80. Jewish tradition ascribes Song of Songs, as well as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, to King Solomon, who is named here as the father of the verse.

81. Maimonides offers the interpretation of verses in Song of Songs before he quotes them. Like the Midrash he uses as his source, he finds in them much more than the simple meaning.

82. The explanation comes from Song of Songs Rabbah 7:1. The application of the sentence is likewise there, and also the sense of the Mahanaim dance. Several implications of the word *Shulammite* are recorded there.

83. This is the verse he divides between the nations and her questioning reply.

84. The Hebrew word, a dual, means two camps.

85. In the verse after the account of the great vision and before the Ten Commandments were pronounced.

86. This is part of an enigmatic series of verses that may refer to the theophany at Sinai.

87. Regarding the four empires see note 55 above. The reference to them is found in Song of Songs Rabbah 7:1. The two empires in Maimonides' time were Christendom and Islam.

88. In its context the verse does not imply compulsion or even suasion, but that it will be a consequence of their exile and dispersion.

89. Maimonides knew firsthand that persecutions and forced conversions do not affect the entire Jewish population, but are limited to certain areas.

90. The complete verse reads: *And the many evils and troubles befall them—then this poem shall confront them as a witness, since it will never be lost from the mouth of their offspring. For I know what plans they are devising even now, before I bring them into the land that I promised on oath.*

91. After opening with a recitation of God's wonders to His people, which they heard from their parents, the chapter deals with the grave distress that afflicts the nation, emphasizes their steadfastness, and wonders why God allows them to be harassed.

92. Song of Songs Rabbah 2:7. It is called *Midrash Ḥazita* because it opens with this word (Prov. 22:20). Maimonides' rabbinic source is also BT Gittin 57b.

93. This and the preceding sentence are directed at the contemporaries in Yemen who are victims of the forced conversion. The treatment of this sacrifice is said to be *an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord* [Lev. 1:9].

94. In context the verse is Moses' call to the Levites to punish the worshipers of the golden calf.

95. The same behavior is urged by Maimonides on the victims of the Almohad persecution. See the *Epistle on Martyrdom*, p. 32.

96. Deut. 28:58 reads: *If you fail to observe faithfully all the terms of this Teaching that are written in this book, to reverence this honored and awesome Name, the Lord your God.*

97. He has in mind the practice of scholars in the Middle Ages who wandered from home to centers of study and discussion of Torah, and showed readiness to endure discomfort for this. It should be remembered that Christian and Muslim students also followed this practice.

98. This is a commonly held view, which is also mentioned in BT Gittin 52b, 53a. This was also the judgment of the man who aroused Maimonides' anger in the *Epistle on Martyrdom*.

99. The reasoning of this sort is summed up in the principle that "he suffers a severer penalty" [BT Gittin 53a], i.e., since he is punished for the grave sin of forsaking the Torah, it makes little difference that he disregards a single prescription.

100. He is the archsinner in Jewish tradition, cf. *Epistle on Martyrdom*, p. 28.

101. Maimonides may have selected this example because it is considered a "light act," i.e., not of major significance. See BT Avodah Zarah 3a.

102. His identity is not known. As an apostate to Islam he evidently undertook to spread the new faith among his former coreligionists.

103. The numerical value of the letters of these two words (Gen. 17:20) is ninety-two, and so is the value of the letters *MḤMD*, Muhammad.

104. Deut. 33:2 reads: *He said: The Lord came from Sinai; He shone upon them from Seir; He appeared from Mount Paran, and approached from Ribeboth-kodesh, lightning flashed at them from His right*. This is a brief summary of the theophany.

105. Deut. 18:15 reads: *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet from among your own people, like myself; him you shall heed*.

106. In response to Abraham's plea: *Oh that Ishmael may live by Your favor!* God speaks: *As for Ishmael, I have heeded you. I hereby bless him. I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous. He shall be the father of twelve chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation* [Gen. 17:18,20].

107. This accusation is found in the Koran (e.g., 2:73), and it was taken up and expanded later by Muslim critics of Jews and Judaism. Cf. article by Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), the outstanding student of Islam, in *Zeitschrift der morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 32 (1878): 341–67 and by Martin Schreiner (1863–1926), in ibid., 42:591–675.

108. This word was coined to reflect the play on words Maimonides utilizes. The Arabic term for *apostle* is *rasul;* the Hebrew word is *pasul,* which sounds like it means unfit, disqualified.

109. Literally, "a tradition from everybody to everybody." In the Islamic world a statement handed down in an unbroken chain from generation to generation by the whole community is unchallengeably true.

110. Modern examination of the Greek, Latin, and Syriac versions of the Bible have revealed a great many variations.

111. I.e., the phrase implies only numerical strength, with no suggestion of prophethood.

112. In this phrase also the root *rb* is used to denote a large population.

113. If the verb *I shall bless him* stood before the words *I will make him numerous,* it might be understood by people desperately looking for proof to refer to their prophet.

114. The two words *bm'd m'd* come right after the phrase *I shall make him numerous,* not after the earlier verb *I shall bless him*.

115. Maimonides stresses this point to exclude any other claimant, just as earlier Judah Halevi developed the idea in *Kuzari* 2:14.

116. The context of the verse is the incident of Sarah's demand that her husband cast out Ishmael and his mother. Since Abraham hesitated, God assures him of Isaac's privileged status.

117. The use of the particle *gam* (too) proves that Ishmael is an addition, a concession to Abraham's concern for this son (see Gen. 21:10–13).

118. Part of Jacob's blessing of his two grandchildren, the sons of Joseph.

119. At the point where the patriarch's name is changed from Abram to Abraham.

120. It follows the consolation to Abraham regarding Ishmael.

121. In Isaac's blessing to Jacob when the latter is about to leave for Haran.

122. The reference is to David, the traditional author of Psalms. He is not generally known by the epithet *prophet*. In the *Guide* 2:45 Maimonides categorizes him as a prophet of the second class (out of eleven). In Islam David is taken to be a prophet; see *EI*$^2$, 2:182.

123. Koran 7:156.

124. Koran 61:6. Maimonides cites these two passages to substantiate his challenge. Muhammad asserts he is mentioned in the Torah, but elsewhere he declares his name is Ahmed.

125. The Koranic verse is "And when Jesus son of Mary said, O children of Israel, verily I am the apostle of God sent unto you, confirming the law which was delivered before me, and bringing good tidings of an apostle who shall come after me, and whose name shall be Ahmad."

126. The Hebrew words equal ninety-two and the name AHMD, fifty-three.

127. Exod. 24:16 reads: *The Presence of the Lord abode on Mount Sinai, and the cloud hid it for six days. On the seventh day He called to Moses from the midst of the cloud.*

128. Judg. 5:4 continues: *the earth trembled; the heavens dripped, yea, the clouds dripped water*. This is Deborah's ode in celebration of the victory over the Canaanites.

129. *Sifrei* (ed. Finkelstein), 396 (section 343); the story of the offer of Torah to the gentiles is linked to this verse.

130. The rabbis humorously criticize the Israelites for being in such haste to receive the Torah that they said they would *do* before they would *obey* (literally: "we will listen").

131. This verse is a stock argument among Muslim polemicists. The literal translation of the text in the Torah is: *from among you, from your brethren, like me*. See Samau'al al-Maghribi, *Silencing the Jews*, 45.

132. Samau'al argues that the words *Your brethren* may well apply to an Arab, supporting himself by the phrase: *Your brethren the children of Esau* (Deut. 2:4).

133. No one can doubt that this is a most reasonable requirement. Nor can Maimonides be challenged that he takes passages out of context. If it is for the purpose of edification, bolstering the faith, or any other purpose consonant with tradition, it is legitimate. But it cannot be done if it is misused to undermine the tradition.

134. The context of the verse is the attempt by a false prophet to seduce the people to worship idols.

135. Part of God's admonition not to be seduced to worship idols. Deut. 11:16 reads: *Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them*.

136. Num. 20:14 continues: *You know all the hardships that have befallen us*. See note 132 above.

137. Maimonides consistently teaches that Moses was unique among the prophets; in fact, he should not be regarded as a prophet.

138. Deut. 18:9–16 reads: *When you enter the land that the Lord your*

*God is giving you, you shall not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. Let no one be found among you who consigns his son or daughter to the fire, or who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead. For anyone who does such things is abhorrent to the Lord, and it is because of these abhorrent things that the Lord your God is dispossessing them before you. You must be wholehearted with the Lord your God. Those nations that you are about to dispossess do indeed resort to soothsayers and augurs; to you however, the Lord your God has not assigned the like.*

*The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet from among your own people, like myself; him you shall heed.*

139. The loss was the asses of his father, which led to his being anointed king over Israel.

140. Two random common names.

141. Of the characters of Job, save the last, it is generally assumed they were gentiles (BT Bava Batra 14b). Elihu ben Berakh'el ha-Buzi is said to have been Jewish. However, a number of sages hold Job also to have been Jewish. In fact, a summary seems to conclude that only some regard him a non-Jew. And in BT Avodah Zarah 3a only the first three friends are taken to be non-Jews.

142. He was challenged by the prophet Jeremiah, and was proved to have delivered a false prediction; see Jer. 28.

143. Deut. 5:24, the last sentence of the story of their fear to listen to God directly lest they die, reads: *You go closer and hear all that the Lord our God says, and then you tell us everything that the Lord our God tells you, and we willingly do it.*

144. Continuing the assertion that the fulfillment of the Torah is not much of a strain, Deut. 30:12 emphasizes: *It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?"*

145. Deut. 13:1 reads in full: *Be careful to observe only that which I enjoin upon you: neither add to it nor take away from it.*

146. I.e., if we were an independent state, and not subject to other governments with their legal systems. It is to be noted how emphatic Maimonides is in his insistence that first and foremost is the content of the pretender's message rather than the skills he may display.

147. Deut. 13:4 reads: *Do not heed the words of that prophet or that dream-diviner. For the Lord your God is testing you. . . .*

148. Once again Maimonides states his basic thesis: nothing about the role of Moses, his person, or his miracles bears any resemblance to any other prophet.

149. Since his discourse is beyond criticism, we ask him to perform a miracle to verify that he is indeed a prophet.

150. The miracle is parallel to the testimony of two witnesses who may be sure of what they wish to testify and we accept their statements as valid without their feeling of certainty.

151. See note 146 above.

152. Deut. 17:6 rules: *A person shall be put to death only on the testimony of two or more witnesses; he must not be put to death on the testimony of a single witness*. This is the basis of the faith put in two witnesses.

153. A full exposition of the subject will be found in the Introduction (ed. Kafiḥ), 4–11.

154. In this admonition Maimonides warns his readers against the wiles of anti-Talmudic Jewish groups, such as the Karaites or the Samaritans, who protest their absolute faith in the Torah, but do not accept the oral tradition.

155. In Maimonides' time Egypt was the home of many Karaites and Samaritans, and many were influential in their group or in government circles.

156. In one of his responsa (ed. Blau, no. 242/II, 434ff.), Maimonides refers several times to the pernicious influence of "the heretics," and the duty to contravene them.

157. This is the traditional wish for an early restoration of political independence and the ingathering of the exiles to their homeland, the land of Israel.

158. This is not a legal decision to be implemented, but a definition of the extent of their rejection.

159. Deut. 17:11 continues: *you must not deviate from the verdict that they announce to you either to the right or to the left*. The rabbis explain the last phrase to mean that even if in your judgment they were to call the right left and left right. See *Sifrei* 207 (section 154).

160. The Christians have almost always considered the Jewish Scriptures as part of their divine heritage. The Muslims have not incorporated the Bible into their sacred literature, but they admit its divine origin. Curiously, they, on the one hand, accuse the Jews of altering and of falsifying it, yet at the same time they seek to find in it proof of their claims.

161. In Daniel (7:24, 8:14, 25; 9:24–6; 12:7, 11, 12) numbers appear that tradition has recognized as mystifying calculations predicting the end of the travail and the beginning of the glorious era (in Hebrew: *ketz*). Many Jewish writers have attempted to figure out when the change will come.

162. Saadiah Gaon (882–942) devotes chapter 8 of his philosophic work, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, to the establishment of the date. See Rosenblatt's translation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), pp. 290–322 and especially 295–98.

163. In his work *A History of Messianic Speculations in Israel* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), A.H. Silver summarizes the conclusions of the various students who attempted to fix the date. See in particular chapter 1 on the eleventh and twelfth centuries (pp. 58–80).

164. The passage from which this verse comes is a declaration of God to Abraham: *Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years*.

165. This is the name of the vision in Gen. 15:8–21, where the covenant was made in a ceremony involving passage between the pieces of the beasts that Abraham had cut.

166. Evidently Maimonides has Exod. 12:40–41 in mind. The first of the

two verses reads: *The time the Israelites lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years*. It was then that Moses was sent by God to free the Israelites from bondage in Egypt.

167. This incident is an old tradition, cf. *Mekhilta* 13:17 (ed. Rabin, p. 76) and 15:14 (p. 147).

168. Cf. 1 Chron. 7:21.

169. Gen. 21:12 reads: *But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac . . .*" This is the accepted calculation, since, as we read elsewhere, their actual bondage lasted 210 years.

170. The commentator Nahmanides (1194–1270) suggests that the correct order of the phrases is different, i.e., *your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs four hundred years and they shall be enslaved and oppressed*.

171. Maimonides makes this statement in view of the premature move of the tribe of Ephraim.

172. It is obvious that in its context this verse (and the next) deals with a much more immediate difficulty. But Maimonides does not hesitate to read another meaning into it since it does not violate the spirit of the religious outlook.

173. BT Sanhedrin 97b. Maimonides' reasoning has its origin in the Talmud, which continues with this explanation: for they (the calculators), when their prediction time arrives and the redemption is not in sight, conclude that it is not going to happen. No, you have to wait, as the prophet says: *Even if it tarries, wait for it still* [Hab. 2:3].

174. The excuse he offers for Saadiah's efforts to fix the date of the redemption can be offered for the other attempts to calculate it. The masses were probably at all times not firm believers in the ultimate change for the better, so anything more definite might bolster their faith.

175. See note 35 above.

176. This phrase is taken from Mishnah Avot 2:15, and offered as counsel to the members of the community.

177. Maimonides follows the commendable Jewish tradition of maintaining an attitude of respect and acceptance of the words and acts of the ancient sages.

178. Maimonides was one of the few in the Middle Ages, Jews or non-Jews, who rejected astrology, and he tried hard to disprove it.

179. In his three major Jewish compositions, the *Commentary to the Mishnah*, the *Code*, and the *Guide*, Maimonides gave voice to his strong repudiation of astrology. In his response to the sages of France, who wished to learn his opinion, he took the same stand, and even blamed the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans on the Jewish neglect of preparedness, owing to their reliance on astrology.

180. An epithet of Moses. Maimonides' appreciation of the uniqueness of Moses traditionally and philosophically very naturally led him to designate the prophet in these terms; Jewish tradition likewise regards him this way. It must also be remembered that when the other dominant faiths glorified their

founders and objects of worship (cf. Tor Andrae, *Die Person Mohammads*), Jews realized they had to emphasize the superiority of Moses.

181. In Isaiah's "lament" over the calamity that will overwhelm Egypt.

182. From Isaiah's satire on Babylonia.

183. Maimonides summarizes the doctrine that Judaism was replaced by Christianity and that no improvement would come in the fate of the Jews before they confessed the beliefs of the dominant faiths.

184. One of the numerous verses of consolation, which begin with Isaiah 40.

185. Although Maimonides rejects astrology, he demonstrates his knowledge of it by the certainty with which he makes his assertions.

186. The imaginary zodiac can be divided by two axes, one vertical, the other horizontal, into four quarters called trigons, and three of the twelve constellations are located in each. The earthly trigon (the others are the watery, airy, and fiery), according to the astrologers, is the period when culture is at an ebb.

187. Here is another argument against the inclination to believe in the effects of the heavenly bodies.

188. With the aid of astronomy it was possible to work out the relation between events and the movements of the stars and planets.

189. This chapter recites the impressiveness of Solomon and his accomplishments.

190. Exodus Rabbah 2:13. Maimonides calls Abraham by this title in *MT Hilkhot Akum* 1:2 and in the *Guide* 3:29.

191. This is the honor of Abraham, that by his reasoning he arrived at the correct recognition of the God of the universe. It is the basis of the legend that he was thrown into the hot furnace by the idolatrous Babylonian king.

192. The statement (based on Gen. 35:13) is found in Genesis Rabbah 47 and 82. Note that by the insertion of the phrase *in their hearts* Maimonides converts the rabbinic explanation into a psychological experience. This rabbinic assertion was also explained theosophically. See Encyclopedia Judaica, vol. 10, 505 (in the article "Kabbala").

193. Abraham bar Ḥiyya (twelfth century), who believed in astrology, also states in his *Megillat ha-Megalleh*, pp. 119–33, that the events enumerated here occurred during the earthly trigon. But he involves the course of the other planets and their locations within the zodiac, and does not call the earthly trigon unlucky. His figures are exact, unlike the round figures of Maimonides.

194. "Professional" astrologers in medieval times predicted that it would happen. See Boll, *Sternglaube und Sterndeutung*, p. 111.

195. For the source of this belief see L. Ginzberg, "A deluge of fire and water" (in Hebrew), in *ha-Goren*, VIII. It is reported by Syrian and Arab historians that in 1095 the caliph Mustazhir in Baghdad was informed that the deluge in Noah's time was caused by a conjunction of the seven planets, and in this ruler's time six planets met and a heavy rain fell elsewhere.

196. Maimonides repeats this true adage in his letter to the French sages.

197. That is, a calamity in nature resulting from the unusual position of the planets.

198. Maimonides recalls what the Bible records of the sins of mankind and God's sending the deluge to *blot out from the earth the men whom I created—men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them* [Gen. 6:7].

199. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, in punishment of *the outrage . . . that is so great, and their sin so grave* [Gen. 18:20], is related in the remainder of Gen. 18 and 19.

200. Whenever Maimonides challenges the belief in astrology as sinful, he utilizes the same verses from Lev. 26 as proof that *sin only* is the cause of calamity for Israel, as in *Hilkhot Ta'aniyyot* 1:3, the *Guide* 3:37, his letter to the French sages, and the *Essay on Resurrection*, pp. 230ff.

201. Maimonides paraphrases Lev. 26:21 and then he quotes from it. The context of the quoted phrase is: *I will go on smiting you sevenfold for your sins*.

202. Maimonides does not reveal the name of the individual who made the forecast. Since he finds that the Almohad persecution came when he predicted the appearance of the Messiah, it can be concluded that he expected him about 1150. Ibn Ezra, in his commentary on Dan. 11:30, counts several who made computations but were all disappointed, and calls their efforts "futile and pursuit of wind," arguing that even Daniel himself did not know the date.

203. This is a psychological truth and shows understanding of the mood of the Yemenite leader, who was ready to believe anything in the hope that it would bring relief.

204. Maimonides' specification that the Messiah is to be a scion of David through Solomon made here, in his commentary to Mishnah Sanhedrin ch. 10, in *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, negative commands 362, and in his *Epistle on Martyrdom* is meant to combat a tradition that traced the genealogy to Nathan son of David (cf. 2 Sam. 5:14), and confused him with the prophet Nathan. Cf. Rashi's comment to Zech. 12:12.

205. Part of Balaam's last predictions to the Moabite king Balak.

206. In the last song by Moses, a review of the history of God's relation with Israel, and a demonstration of the futility of idolatry.

207. Describing the imminence of the messenger.

208. Some commentators on the Book of Daniel in Muslim lands found reference to Muhammad in the second half of Dan. 11 and 12. Ibn Ezra is a notable exception. But in his interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Dan. 2 he identifies the iron with the Muslims, unlike the usual trend of seeing Rome in the iron. He calls Byzantium Rome, yet it is Greece. He likewise finds the Muslims in Daniel's vision in 7.

209. Rashi and Radak correctly apply the vision to the Elamites and the Medes, who were about to overthrow Babylonia. But Maimonides, not bound by the context, sees in it a reference to the Messiah.

210. It is a traditional interpretation. Although Radak brings it in the name of some who differ whether it is the Davidic Messiah or the Ephraimite,

he himself is inclined to find in it a reference to Judah the Maccabee, and he further reports that Moses ben Gikatilla thought it spoke about Nehemiah.

211. This too is the traditional view. The traveler ibn Sapir in the nineteenth century wrote that in the city of Alexandria a statue of a camel and its rider was erected to serve as a seat of judgment.

212. Maimonides has Dan. 2 and 7 in mind. See note 208.

213. Maimonides brings in the authorities backing the tradition.

214. Basing themselves on this phrase, the Jews in Muslim Spain generally believed they were descended from the exiles of Jerusalem, and arrogated to themselves the distinction of being the most eloquent in Hebrew. See Moses ibn Ezra, *Book of Examination and Discussion* (ed. Halkin) pp. 54–55, and ibn Daud, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* (ed. Cohen, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967), p. 97, line 94ff.

215. Maimonides digresses at this point to offer illustrations of how biblical allusions aided the rabbis. His purpose is to inspire more faith in the tradition of his family.

216. The implication is in Genesis Rabbah 91:2. The number 210 is the total years of bondage from the death of Joseph.

217. The remainder of Deut. 4:25 reads: . . . *act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness, causing the Lord your God displeasure and vexation.*

218. In the Hebrew word the two *vavs* are not included in the computation.

219. For example, in Hab. 3:2, the phrase *in Your anger remember to have mercy* has the Hebrew word *rhm,* which is said to hint at Abraham (both equal 248).

220. The argument is based on the word *ka'et,* "like the present time."

221. For the year 2448 for the Exodus, see Rashi's computation in BT Sanhedrin 9a.

222. The remainder of this section of Joel 3 predicts great cosmic upheavals, wars, and refuge in Zion.

223. The report of this tradition raises several questions. What Maimonides calls "a family secret" is in fact a statement in JT Shabbat ch. 6, Hal. 9 (43a). Despite his awareness of acting contrary to his own admonitions and availing himself of the excuse that people were falling into despair, some scholars have suggested that this section is not part of the original epistle, but was interpolated by an outside hand. However, he does not actually predict the arrival of the Messiah, but only the renewal of prophecy. Above all, it is important that younger contemporaries or immediate successors of his speak of this family tradition, and the first translator into Hebrew corresponded with the Master. Further, it cannot be reasonably maintained that after 1216 (when prophecy did not return) someone would insert a forecast that it would return. Possibly Maimonides, who robbed his friend of the hope that the community was at the threshold of the final Redemption, felt that he had to provide him with some comfort.

224. Maimonides' explanation of the verse agrees with Rashi and Radak.

225. It is a bit surprising that Maimonides, who so readily takes verses out of context to confirm his arguments, challenges another person's action.

Possibly he felt that since JT Ta'anit 1:1 suggests the Messiah's age, the sense he finds in this text is more appropriate.

226. It is one of the gates of Damascus. In a pseudepigraph (Zerubabel), it is connected with the emergence of the Messiah.

227. Nothing is known of this pretender.

228. The wicked ruler who initiated the persecution.

229. For an earlier, similar reaction to R. Jacob's belief see p. 116.

230. Maimonides evidently classes the pretender as a false prophet with unfounded claims, and therefore subject to capital punishment.

231. The verses come from the chapter that has been taken to be a sketch of the Messiah.

232. The first six verses of Isa. 9 are explained by some as references to Hezekiah and the expected victory over Assyria. Maimonides' treatment of this text is in the tradition voiced in Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:20.

233. This verse has been viewed by many as a vindication of the Messiah, see BT Sukkah 52a.

234. This assertion is a restatement of BT Shabbat 82a at greater length. Maimonides develops this view in the *Guide* 2:32 and also in his other two major works, the *Mishneh Torah* and the commentary to the Mishnah.

235. The rabbis derive from this biblical verse the rule that a person must not spend on charitable needs more than a fifth of his possessions (BT Ketubbot 50a and Arakhin 28a).

236. In *MT Hilkhot Arakhin* 8:1, Maimonides explains: "This giving more is not piety but silliness, since he will lose his money and will require help."

237. The emphasis on the land of Israel's being the Messiah's locale, also made in the *Epistle on Martyrdom*, is further proof that the pretender's claim is unfounded.

238. The Aramaic Targum of the Prophets (*Targum Jonathan*) says of this text: "This is the King Messiah, whose name is destined to be revealed." Bible commentators find a reference to Zerubabel in it.

239. This chapter, which is the essential one in linking Jesus to the Bible in the Christian view, has been regarded by many Jewish scholars as referring to the Messiah. Others find Israel depicted in it, and still others Jeremiah. See Neubauer, *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah* (Oxford: J. Parker, 1876–77), vol. 1 (texts), vol. 2 (translations).

240. See Rashi and Radak ad loc. who read of the Messianic age in this chapter, as Saadiah Gaon did before them.

241. Like other arguments, this one also aims to undo hopes pinned on the pretender.

242. Notwithstanding the chapter division at the end of this verse, it and the preceding sentence belong with ch. 53, and are treated so by commentators.

243. From the messianic chapter; see note 231.

244. The grave threat and the divine role in the triumph of the Israelites over the combined hostile forces are graphically sketched by Ezekiel in chapters 38–39.

245. It is of interest that Maimonides chooses his proof against the

pretender from the story of Jesus, as he lived in the Muslim world all his life, and Muhammad also had a chain of miracles credited to him and a spiritualization of his person that continued to grow (cf. Tor Andrae, *Die Person Muhammads*, pp. 26–91 and 285–89). The wonders of Jesus are much more fundamental in Christian theology than the miracles of Muhammad in Islam.

246. As a deliberate impostor who arrogates to himself powers granted by God to the Messiah, he would be guilty of a grave sin. But this individual was not a presumptuous liar.

247. The verse begins: *For their rock is not like our Rock*. This quotation is part of Moses' farewell address to the people at the eastern bank of the Jordan.

248. This judgment indicates that Maimonides probably did not know enough of the difficult situation of the Jews in the Christian lands from the time of the Crusades (1096 and after), which was far more irksome and physically painful than under the Muslims.

249. Ibn Ezra and Radak cite the *History of ben Gorion* to the effect that Meshekh is Tuscany, an application of metonymy. But Radak prefers to translate the *meshekh* as *continuous*, and to explain that the cry is against Islam, "because the majority of the Jews live there."

250. Maimonides evidently equates *Kedar* with *Kuraish*, the tribe of Muhammad and the caliphs, as does Radak.

251. The verse describes the sad condition of the northern Israelites under Aramaic rule.

252. Dan. 8:10, with changes. See the comment of pseudo-Saadiah.

253. In the Middle Ages the Jews under Christendom and Islam were forbidden to criticize those religions publicly.

254. Gen. 25:14. Three names from the list of the "children of Ishmael." The meanings he assigns to the names conform to the meanings of the roots on which the names are built.

255. This is one of the few instances where Isaiah speaks of himself in the first person.

256. Notwithstanding note 248 above, the depth of suffering experienced by Maimonides and his generation from the humiliation, degradation, and false charges heaped on them by the Muslims, particularly at the time of the Almohad persecution, is not to be minimized.

257. The examples of the four Messiahs are available in two versions. Although weighty reasons support the belief that the succinct account is the original in the epistle, the longer one is offered here in translation.

258. For some reason Maimonides does not mention his name. He seems to have been Abu 'Isa Obadiah al-Isfahani, active during the eighth or ninth century, and the spiritual father of the Isawiyya, a sect treated by Jewish, Karaite, and Islamic historians.

259. This dynasty ruled the Islamic empire from 661 to 750 and vastly expanded its extent.

260. This is the name in Arabic of the land beyond the Oxus river, the province of Khurasan.

261. In the description of the individual who suffered, yet was destined to be acknowledged as the sufferer for the many. One of the epithets can be translated *leprous*.

262. This is distinctly anachronistic. It was only some hundred years after his fall that a caliph of another family issued such an edict against the Jews.

263. It is surprising that Maimonides did not consult the available written sources.

264. The implication is clear: Maimonides is not at all certain of the story he related regarding the first pretender.

265. This man is not to be confused with Moses ben Abraham Dar'i, a twelfth-thirteenth-century Karaite poet, whose father moved from Dar'a to Alexandria. See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 5:1302.

266. An important rabbinic scholar (1077–1141), with whom Maimon, Maimonides' father, studied Torah.

267. It is interesting that this prophecy speaks of the inspiration that will be bestowed on old and young, men and women.

268. Consistent with his views, Maimonides accepts without demur the prophetic endowment of this man.

269. The restraint and respect with which Maimonides relates this incident are impressive. He stresses his virtues, despite the illusions under which he labored. Maimonides cites him in one of his responsa in the matter of *tefillin*, cf. Blau's ed. no. 289.

270. The Hebrew phrase usually signifies the question regarding a dream asked of an interpreter. In our text it means finding something out by a dream.

271. Maimonides relates this story on the authority of his father, who lived in Cordova with his family before they set out on their wanderings. It is an incident for which he can vouch.

272. A likely misspelling of Lyon, an old city in France, but hardly containing the population of Jews mentioned here.

273. These verses do not suggest flying, only appearance in the clouds.

274. The loyalty of followers to a disappointing, disappointed redeemer, and the continued belief that he will come back and realize his predictions is common in the annals of the Shi'ite sects.

275. This is one of three times repeated in Song of Songs, and on that basis the rabbis stated that God adjured Israel in a threefold oath: that they not force the final redemption, not rebel against their rulers, and that the gentiles not oppress them too harshly (BT Ketubbot 111a). It is of interest that this talmudic statement serves as the main reason for many people's opposition to the Zionist movement and to the State of Israel.

276. This characterization of the manner of creation is found in rabbinic sources, cf. BT Ḥagigah 12a and Genesis Rabbah 12:15. Interestingly, Gen. 1, the story of creation, carries the name *Elohim*, which indicates divine justice. In Gen. 2 this name is used jointly with the tetragrammaton (the four-letter name), which stands for divine mercy, and therefore the tradition has included it in the story of creation.

277. Phrases from Ps. 27:4, which are very easily fashioned into a prayer for an early return to the land of Israel.

278. Isa. 9:1 continues: *On those who dwelt in a land of gloom, light has dawned.*

279. Isa. 60:2 continues: *And His Presence be seen over you.*

280. The customary conclusion of the letter, addressed to R. Jacob ben Nathanel Fayummi, begins at this point.

281. The phrase is from Ps. 72:7, which opens with: *That the righteous may flourish in his time.*

282. On the one hand Maimonides urges the recipient to circulate the epistle among the members of the community. At the same time he cautions him against letting it fall into the hands of a non-Jew. If there was contact between Jews and Muslims in Yemen, it is difficult to assume that it could be arranged both to have Jews read it and to avoid communication of it to non-Jews.

283. A phrase usually invoked when privacy or secrecy is recommended.

284. This is the traditional succession as traced in rabbinic sources. Maimonides mentions it because he wishes to endow their statement with authority.

285. BT Pesaḥim 8a. As he comments, the epistle certainly falls within the category of a religious mission.